

OVERLORD 7

The Invaders of the Great Tomb

Kugane Maruyama

Illustration by so-bin



Foresight Subjugation Performance

MAGICAL BEAST ARENA BATTLE

- Large Saber Wolf × 1
- Saber Wolf × 4
- Greater Toven Tiger × 1
- Azerlisian Iron Turtle × 1

BOWNE SWAMP MONSTER EXTERMINATION [(#1)]

- Purple Worm × 3
- Will-o'-the-Wisp × 1
- Swamp Shark × 1

BOWNE SWAMP MONSTER EXTERMINATION [(#2)]

- Large Purple Worm × 1

HERB HARVESTING DEEP IN THE WOODLANDS

- Manticore × 1
- Manticore Cub × 2
- Crazed Dryad × 1
- Wolf × 8
- Myconid × 2
- Toven Bear × 1

OGRE TRIBE SUBJUGATION

- Ogre × 10
- Ogre Sorcerer × 1
- Goblin × 34
- Hobgoblin × 3

ELDER LICH CORPS SUBJUGATION

- Skeleton Warrior × 4
- Skeleton Mage × 3
- Skeleton × 40
- Elder Lich × 1


We are the level-100 NPCs of Nazarick!
Glory to the great ruler Ainz Ooal Gown!

OVERLORD

Volume 7: The Invaders of the Great Tomb

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YEN ON
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Prologue

PROLOGUE

In the very heart of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, deep within the tenth floor, the Throne Room adorned with forty flags simmered with excitement.

Everyone there had formed ranks while silently bowing their heads toward the throne in a display of their loyalty.

Grotesques filled the rows. Needless to say, the floor guardians were also present. Other NPCs created by the Forty-One Supreme Beings and the minions who reported directly to the guardians were also in attendance. There were easily over two hundred total present at the first gathering this large since the day they had arrived in their current world.

One thing, however, was different from previous times. This wasn't the usual lineup. The audience was packed to the brim with powerful beings—the average level in the room was over 80.

Shalltear, guardian of the first three floors of Nazarick, usually had her vampire brides at her side, but today she had summoned her most elite undead followers. Then there was Mare, one of the two guardians on the sixth floor, who was accompanied by a pair of dragons that had never left their posts until now. These dragons were almost level 90 and could only be obtained as a super-rare drop from loot boxes.

Even among the carefully selected minions, one group stood out.

In comparison to everyone else, this group of undead was more than slightly inferior. There were around a hundred of

them, the highest level among them only 40, lined up alongside the other two hundred beings in the chamber.

The regular denizens formed rows facing the throne, but the out-of-place undead, which were the least impressive of those invited to this sacred place, were arranged in lines near the very front, right beside the guardians themselves. They stood shockingly close to the throne, indicating higher status.

It was unthinkably favorable treatment, but there was a good reason for this.

Those creatures had been created by the ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, Ainz Ooal Gown himself. It would be a mistake to neglect them.

All of those present were Ainz's subordinates. They devoted themselves completely to the guild Ainz Ooal Gown, but at the same time, there was a clear hierarchy of superiors and inferiors. Naturally, NPCs personally created by the Forty-One Supreme Beings were at the very top. Among those, the guardians of each level stood highest.

After these NPCs, the next in rank were the auto-spawning monsters, plus those created by the *Yggdrasil* mercenary system —minions. To an extent, the standing of minions depended on their strength and their responsibilities, but the majority of them were lined up side by side with no differentiation.

So where did the undead created by Ainz fit in?

This question was a tricky one for Albedo, captain of the guardians. She wondered if they should be considered equal to the NPCs.

When she consulted Ainz, he broke into a smile and declared that the lowest position was fine.

Ainz's undead creation ability could only be used a limited number of times per day, but it had no cost. The high-level minions that the guardians brought with them, however, had been created with gold coins or real cash through the game *Yggdrasil*'s mercenary system. If the undead minions died, they could be created for free, but if the high-level minions died, the money invested in them went up in smoke. In Ainz's view, although they still required a corpse, the free monsters he created were clearly inferior to anything that cost money.

But his loyal subordinates did not share this view. Though moved to tears by their magnanimous master's decision, Albedo was unable to accept it. In distress, she sidestepped the issue by making an exception and lining the minions up one behind the other.

Ainz looked down from the room's highest point over the ranks that Albedo had racked her brains to organize and spoke quietly like an oracle. No, to all the beings under his influence, his words were nothing less than those of a god.

"First, I'd like to thank you for your extended service gathering intelligence, Sebas and Solution. Well done." Ainz nodded in satisfaction when the pair below bowed deeply. But the hard part came next. Behaving like a king was too much for an ordinary person to handle; the pressure was staggering. Below him stood a sea of subordinates. Love and respect sparkled in their eyes.

The stomach Ainz didn't even have began to ache while his equally nonexistent heart pounded.

But that only lasted a moment. The intense desire he felt to flee was forcibly dispelled by a particular characteristic of his undead body, which suppressed emotional fluctuations.

After finally concluding he could perform his role as ruler to satisfaction, Ainz started giving out orders.

“Both of you, come before me.”

The two who had been mentioned rose together. With such synchronized movements, anyone would think the event had been rehearsed. They climbed the stairs to the throne and halted before Albedo, who stood adjacent to Ainz.

They kneeled in unison.

“Raise your heads. In recognition of your excellent work, I’m going to reward you.” Ainz looked at Sebas. “Sebas, you begged for Tsuare’s life, but the reason I put her under my protection was to pay back a debt—it had nothing to do with your service. Therefore, I’ll grant you a wish. Now then, tell me what you’d like.”

Praising someone in public could rouse the onlookers to action. That was the general aim of giving the President’s Award out in front of the entire company. Subordinates motivated by rewards improved the overall efficiency of the organization. That was why Ainz had utilized his experience as a working adult and gathered so many of his people here—to create an opportunity to inspire that zeal.

But there was also an extremely dangerous side to this plan—because Ainz had to exude the charisma of a ruler in front of a massive amount of people. That was no easy feat for an ordinary person. Still, as the last player left in the Great Tomb of Nazarick, it was a mission he needed to clear.

I have to live up to their devotion.

As Ainz steeled his will, Sebas’s mustache quivered.

“My wish is to devote myself completely to—”

These guys are insanely loyal. That’s why I’m under so much pressure…

“Good, but I’m rewarding you for a job well done. That’s something a ruler should do. Know that there are times when a follower’s lack of selfishness can displease their master.”

“My lord, I beg your pardon! In that case…” Sebas thought for several seconds and then spoke. “By way of your benevolence, I would like clothing and necessities for Tsuare, my ward.”

“…For clothes, I could take something out of my private collection, but…”

During his *Yggdrasil* days, since there wasn’t much chance of coming across limited edition items or player-made skins more than once, he always snapped up any appearance-related goods that caught his interest even a little bit with no hesitation. And it wasn’t just Ainz. All his friends tended to do the same. No, it was likely that any player would do the same thing.

Ainz’s guildmate, the man who created Shalltear—Peroroncino—called it *The phenomenon of obtaining something even if you aren’t sure you’ll use it or not, just like you do with sexy pics.* He continued, *Well, most of the time you forget about it and it lies dormant in a folder somewhere, but…*

And that was exactly what happened. Ainz had collected men’s and women’s gear alike, but most of it was in storage and had never been used. It was all going to waste fertilizing his wardrobe. Finding something to do with it would be much smarter.

Ainz considered all the garments he’d amassed. Clothes in *Yggdrasil* were often a bit gaudy, but he figured there had to be something perfect for Tsuare in there somewhere.

“No, you don’t have to do that. You’ve already been so kind to Tsuare. I think anything more would be too much.”

“I see… That’s fine, then. But clothes, huh…?”

For Ainz, who had never bought women's clothing before, it was too difficult a job. *What if I pick it and she thinks I have bad taste?* His ratings among the female populace of Nazarick would probably plummet.

"Do you mind if I ask Narberal to do the shopping? It wouldn't do to trouble the ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick."

It wasn't as if Sebas had read Ainz's thoughts, but his offer came with perfect timing.

"Narberal, you don't mind, do you?"

In response, one of the NPCs standing at attention below bowed deeply.

"That's fine, then, Sebas. I'll leave it up to Narberal. Or…" He grinned. His face didn't move, of course, but he meant to be grinning. "You could accompany Tsuare as a date."

He'd heard about the pair's relationship from the head maid. Apparently, they hadn't gotten physical yet, but Demiurge was also saying that it was only a matter of time.

Demiurge… Why was he mentioning it would be a good thing for Sebas and Tsuare to have sex? Well, he was probably just celebrating that his colleague got a girlfriend. In that sense, when you think about it, they're getting along pretty well after all. Things were a bit tense in the kingdom, but maybe it was just due to the circumstances…? Well, I'm somewhat relieved. Their creators were always fighting, but I never got too involved…

The root of Touch Me and Ulbert's quarrel lay outside *Yggdrasil*, which was to say in the real world: Ulbert was jealous.

The trouble started after that one fight… That must have triggered it all…

Realizing that now, Ainz felt like he was gazing out over a desert wasteland, but at the sound of Sebas's somewhat surprised voice, he cleared those thoughts from his mind.

"Th-that's all right with you, my lord? If so, then I'd like to take Tsuare shopping."

I'm not the type to pick on a happy couple just because I'm single.

With the silly thought of putting on the jealousy mask and tailing them if they went on a date in E-Rantel, he said, "I don't mind," and gestured with his chin at the other person bowed before him. "Then, Solution, tell me your wish."

"I would love a few humans—live ones, if it's not too much trouble. Nothing would delight me more than if they were also pure."

Ainz thought of the humans they had captured. Most of those still alive were members of the Eight Fingers—in other words, people who had caused him some displeasure. He'd received a report that the ones who seemed useful had been tortured until their spirits were broken. The only others were exceptions under the protection of a pair who were currently in disciplinary confinement.

I can't use those. Pestonia and Nigredo went so far as to defy my word to protect them.

"Okay. I'll give you a few live humans. Just not pure ones. Forgive me for being unable to fulfill all your requests."

"Nonsense! It was not my place to request purity! I am overjoyed to receive live ones!"

In response to Solution's deep bow, Ainz nodded in a manner he thought appropriate for a ruler.

"…I see. Then thank you. Very well, the two of you are dismissed. Entoma, come to me."

Entoma traded places with the other two and kneeled.

"Now then, Entoma."

"MY LORD."

Her voice was difficult to understand and Ainz winced. "So your voice hasn't returned to normal yet."

The Lip Bug Entoma equipped wasn't a monster that autospawned in Nazarick, but that didn't mean they didn't have any. If she used one of the several in her room that had been summoned with *Yggdrasil* coins, she could go back to her base voice at any time. There was only one reason she wouldn't—a grudge.

"IS IT GRATING TO YOUR EARS? I'LL GO PUT ON MY VOICE IMMEDIATELY."

"No, not at all. I don't have anything against this voice, you know."

"THANK YOU!!"

"You worked hard enough to find yourself in this state but not quite enough to warrant a reward. I cannot grant you as much as I did the other two, but is there something you would like?"

Ainz felt that giving out rewards left and right indicated indiscretion, not generosity. A surplus of anything decreased its value.

In that sense, according to Ainz's standards, Entoma's efforts were insufficient for a bonus. Still, sending her away with nothing after she sustained such a serious injury would be unkind.

What's that thing called? A Purple Heart? I don't know much about army stuff. If he were here, he could tell me all about it…

Ainz recalled a guild member who was a military otaku.

"THEN…LORD AINZ, PLEASE LET ME KNOW IF THERE IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO KILL THAT LITTLE GIRL. I WANT TO STEAL HER VOICE."

Realizing she meant the mysterious girl with the mask, Evil-eye, Ainz granted his permission. "Very well. I'll let you know. You're dismissed, Entoma." He watched her return to her previous position. "Okay, moving on…"

Naturally, there were no objections. But Ainz couldn't necessarily be happy about that.

It was quiet because these were people who regarded him as an absolute, who believed that a single word from him could turn white into black. The silence in no way implied he was doing the right thing.

I should probably establish an inspection agency and a bunch of others…

First, he wanted to create a position that would be in charge of conferring honors. The problem was that the NPCs and minions thought devoting themselves to Ainz was only natural, and like Sebas, all of them considered uncompensated service the norm. Another issue was that since the standards of assessment were vague, Ainz was simply deciding performance based on his own values.

If we want to do these things on a bureaucratic level, they'll need to clarified… I suppose this is what I get for heaping all the management of the organization onto Albedo and running away. But this is too much for one ordinary person to handle. I can barely use any of my life experience…

Satoru Suzuki, who had always been on the receiving end of work honors, felt like he could truly sympathize with the pain of

people who had to hand them out, then frantically suppressed the thought. He could think over things when he was rolling around alone on the pleasant-smelling bed back in his room.

"We're going to decide on a plan for Nazarick. Demiurge, to me."

The wisest being in Nazarick ascended the stairs and stood across from Albedo.

"Captain of the guardians, Albedo. Most wise, Demiurge. I believe our original plans are mostly accomplished. I would like to hear your thoughts on what Nazarick's course should be going forward. I also permit anyone else with suggestions to raise their hand."

Ainz's highest priority was the continued existence of Nazarick. No, in the worst case, it would be fine to lose the location as long as he could ensure the safety of his guildmates' children—the NPCs. With their evacuation shelter set up and various other preparations, it would probably be okay.

His second-highest priority was to spread the name of Ainz Ooal Gown throughout the world. The reasoning was based on the optimistic idea that if any of his fellow guild members caught wind of it, they would come to him. He wondered if it would be all right to put this item farther down the list.

The third-highest priority was fortifying Nazarick. Ainz had a feeling that this one should actually be at the top.

It was true that based on his observations, he had gotten the sense that Ainz Ooal Gown was the most powerful organization in a world where the Great Tomb of Nazarick was a mighty, impregnable fortress. Still, the enemy who had mind controlled Shalltear was out there. Even if they were only able to accomplish that with a World Item, it was dangerous to get complacent. And if World Items existed, it wouldn't be a bad move for Nazarick to conduct

itself as if other guilds existed. That was precisely why he felt the distinct need to strengthen their home base.

At the moment, they were in the process of incorporating lizardmen into their organization, while Ainz was continuously creating more undead, but he also thought their efforts needed to be more earnest.

Priority number four was collecting information. It was previously seen as the most important but had been downgraded since they had accomplished it to some degree.

That was the order of operations Ainz had in mind, but in the end, it was an ordinary person's take on things. His plan wasn't based on properly analyzed data, so there could have been holes in it.

That was why Ainz wanted to borrow the wisdom of this pair of intelligent guardians. But if all he wanted was a consultation, he could have summoned just the two of them. Considering how dangerous it would be if they discovered how average Ainz truly was on the inside, it probably wasn't ideal to have the discussion in the current setting.

But actually, that wasn't true.

In fact, he needed to do things this way in order to fulfill his role of master in the manner that the NPCs imagined (although he felt their notions were already in the realm of fantasy). In other words, he needed to be an absolute, unimaginably powerful sage.

"Both of you, speak clearly so everyone can hear. Those present are elites you guardians personally selected. They should all listen to every word of our plan going forward with their own ears."

Yes. This was Ainz's desperate move—a larger scale version of

his "explain it to all the guardians" tactic. It was his strategy to have everything spelled out for him while pretending he already understood under the pretense that someone else did not know yet or that he was requesting a simple explanation everyone could understand.

"Okay, Demiurge. Since some of those present are not aware of all the details, please give a simple rundown about the current situation and what we've done to the kingdom."

"Understood."

Demiurge addressed the NPCs at the bottom of the stairs.

I've been wanting to hear this. Of course, during the latest operation, Ainz had been convinced that the wise Demiurge couldn't possibly be doing anything wrong, but when he really thought about it, he felt like things might be going further than was absolutely necessary.

"Firstly, the highest echelons of the kingdom's underworld are now under our control, thanks to the efforts of Mare, Neuronist, and the Prince of Fear. If we continue to gradually infiltrate, we should be able to conquer it completely."

"...Nn?" Ainz made a small noise. The question of why they were conquering the kingdom's underworld had escaped his lips. He felt like the brief explanation he'd been given before differed somehow. *I guess having a permanent source of cash or easier access to information would be valid reasons?*

As he was thinking that, Demiurge, who had closed his mouth, whirled around to look right at him. Thankful his body couldn't sweat, Ainz asked, "What is it, Demiurge?"

"Oh, I just thought I heard you say something, Lord Ainz."

"Ah, sorry. I meant to murmur my agreement, but I guess it

was unclear. Now, go on. Tell everyone the purpose of conquering the kingdom's underworld."

"Yes, sir. Well, everyone, ruling the kingdom's underworld can be considered a foothold toward Lord Ainz's primary goal of world domination. I assume no one here is so feebleminded that they fail to grasp this."

All the faces Ainz looked down upon shone with comprehension. It didn't seem like there was a single person left in the dark.

Ainz was the only one who didn't understand.

"World domination?"

*What are you talking about? How long have you all been laboring under that assumption?...*were all things he obviously couldn't ask.

Ainz felt the gears of his brain spin faster than they ever had in his entire life as he considered various angles for a few moments.

This is utterly strange. I don't get it. How did this happen? Originally, he had wanted to work quietly to build a reputation without going around making enemies and hopefully contact any of his guildmates who may or may not have been in this world. That was his small, precious wish.

But now—

World domination?! Where the hell did that come from?!

He wanted to deny it, but he didn't have the courage to speak up.

Each and every minion, not to mention the NPCs, had a satisfied expression that seemed to say *naturally*, as if they were being told something they already knew. One glance was enough

to tell that this was a fact that had long passed into common knowledge among everyone assembled. It was like a dry, lonely wind was whistling past the area around the throne.

Ainz Ooal Gown was the absolute ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick and a Supreme Being. That's how his image had been built up, so what would happen now if he destroyed it?

He would be like a pop star exposed by the paparazzi. A celebrity whose fans and profits dwindled would wind up in a sorry state, but he had the feeling his own fate would be far more tragic.

It seems like we've poured too many assets into this to pull back now…

Actually, when he took a moment to think about it, world domination didn't sound so bad.

Of course, it wouldn't be as simple as a video game, but because an ordinary person like Ainz found it so absurd, it likely wasn't concrete enough for him to wrap his head around. But he did realize it would be the perfect way to reach his goal of gaining a reputation—even if it was a bad one.

The only problem would be the opinions of his guildmates if they found out. He would just have to apologize honestly for not being able to control Nazarick.

There's that unknown enemy who brainwashed Shalltear. Maybe I can use that as an excuse… They would forgive me… right?

Having made up his mind, Ainz nodded benevolently at Demiurge, who looked like he was hoping for praise.

"Oh, you remembered?"

“Of course, Lord Ainz. I could never forget a single word you’ve said.”

“I see… So that conversation from back then…”

“Indeed, my lord.”

“…It was that conversation, right…?”

“Indeed, my lord.”

“So it was that time…… Well, I’m glad, Demiurge.”

“Thank you.”

“But you know, world domination is a difficult thing.”

“It certainly is.”

“So…how do you think we should go about it?”

Pretty impressive how my voice isn’t shaking, if I do say so myself.

“I suggest we set world domination as our guiding principle going forward. It is my belief that Nazarick should act openly. With the ones who mind controlled Shalltear currently operating in secret, it could be problematic for us to remain lurking in the shadows.”

“I see…”

Really? Lurking in the shadows seemed safer. Ainz had no clue how Demiurge had arrived at his conclusion.

“I agree, Lord Ainz. If we get the organization out in the open, then we can deal with issues openly as well. We wouldn’t be limited to dispatching handfuls of agents or needing to creep around for investigations anymore.”

Hearing Albedo's explanation, Ainz finally understood. *Oh, I see.*

It was tempting to go from these painstaking operations to simply doing whatever they wanted.

"So we rule the kingdom from behind the scenes, forcing them to acknowledge Nazarick. But I won't stand for this place you rule to be counted as part of the domain of some country, so…"

Demiurge shook his head in response to Albedo's concern. "Of course you wouldn't, Albedo. Neither would I. Besides, I have analyzed and considered the data we collected, and there is practically nothing appealing about the kingdom, with the exception of one person. It's the same for the other countries. I think serving another state would be a foolish plan."

"Why is that?"

"Serving another state would hold us back in some ways. If the ones who mind controlled Shalltear hailed from some organization while we had been serving some state, we might not have been able to act in time. Therefore, Lord Ainz…" Demiurge fixed his eyes on Ainz and solemnly made his suggestion. "…I propose we establish a country called the Great Tomb of Nazarick."



Chapter 1 An Invitation to Death

CHAPTER 1
An Invitation To Death

1

Imperial capital Arwinthal was a ways to the west in the Baharuth Empire's territory. At its center stood the imperial castle where Jircniv Rune Farlord El Nix (also known as the Fresh Blood Emperor) resided, while important facilities of every sort—the graduate school, the empire's magic academy, government agencies—radiated out from it. The city was truly the heart of the empire.

Its population was smaller than the Re-Estize Kingdom's capital, but the scale was much grander. Additionally, due to major reforms over the past several years, the city was in the middle of the greatest growth period in its history. The capital was constantly importing new things, creating an influx of materials and talent, while the old and stagnant parts were demolished. The hope for the future that the residents carried was evident in their cheerful and bright expressions.

The city practically clamored with dizzying excitement as Ainz walked through it with Narberal.

Usually people who had just arrived from the countryside would move slowly and take in their surroundings as they strolled, many of them struck by the many differences between the kingdom and the empire.

But Ainz didn't have that kind of time.

His mental state was clearly reflected in his hurried gait.

The emotion controlling him was displeasure.

Demiurge's plan was the reason for Ainz's trip to the imperial

capital, and every time it came to mind, the furrows in his brow grew deeper—though his face was only a magical illusion.

Patience should have been unnecessary for the absolute ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, Ainz Ooal Gown. Nor should there have been any need for him to suppress his irritation. For an overlord whose word was absolute—a being who could take something white, call it black, and have it be so—there shouldn't have been a single thing that didn't go his way.

So why was he in this situation? Even though he wanted to veto Demiurge's proposal, there was a reason he hadn't been able to.

In terms of putting the power of Nazarick on display, Demiurge's plan was extremely straightforward and would yield immediate results. The reason Ainz didn't like it despite that was because he felt it would bring dishonor on the creations of his friends.

Rejecting a wonderful plan for personal reasons would be deplorable, and he certainly didn't want anyone to think he lacked the broad-mindedness to consider it. Besides, he hadn't been able to come up with a counterproposal.

In the end, objecting without a counterproposal is just one form of whining. It was member of adult society Ainz, not supreme ruler Ainz, who shouted this in his head.

Ainz repeated what he'd already told himself any number of times.

Calm down. You need to chill. If you need to choose between logic and emotions, the correct choice for a boss is obviously logic. Guys who act based on emotions achieve amazing results if they're lucky, but most of the time they come up with nothing worth mentioning. Besides—

“The die is cast, I guess…” Ainz didn’t have any lungs, but he took a deep breath and exhaled.

The citizens giving dubious looks to the warrior who suddenly started breathing heavily in the street didn’t bother him.

His commanding appearance already attracted attention. Especially since he’d been celebrated as a hero, it was actually rarer for no one to be looking at all. For that reason, beyond special circumstances like when he had to put on an act or moments spent riding Hamusuke, the gazes of ordinary people didn’t faze him one bit.

After a few more deep breaths, his creeping discomfort had abated somewhat, and he finally had the energy to pay some attention to Narberal behind him.

“Sorry. Was I walking too fast?”

Ainz was wearing armor, but there was still a big difference between his manly gait and Narberal’s feminine stride, even though she wore a robe. Considering her strength, it probably wasn’t an issue, but as a man, he still felt the need to apologize for pushing ahead without considering her.

“No, not at all.”

“Okay…”

Did she only answer that way because she’s my servant? Or is it really not bothering her? Unsure, Ainz shortened his stride and tried to come up with a topic for conversation.

Feeling a bit embarrassed about how on edge he’d been up until now, he racked his brains for something to talk about but couldn’t come up with anything suitable.

Small talk among salesmen generally consisted of benign top-

ics like the weather. Sports wasn't bad, either, but that required knowing the other person's favorite team ahead of time.

Ainz was trying to think of something like that to bring up as he mentally cursed under his breath. *Why should I have to tiptoe around Narberal? She's my subordinate! This is a perfect chance to practice conversing with underlings while role-playing as a ruler. But I wonder what would be good for a ruler, or rather, I wonder what sorts of things absolute beings chat about…*

Ainz recalled the everyday conversations he used to have with his boss at the office and wondered if that would go over well or not. He was the elite ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, not a corporate executive. If anything, his position was more comparable to that of a company president.

Nah, it's not quite the same as a president… I wonder what kind of conversations the ruler of the kingdom has with Gazef Stronoff. I wish I could use that as a point of reference.

It was a bit late in the game to be mulling over this type of thing. Walking in silence any longer would be awkward. Still unsure if it was a good topic, Ainz desperately broached one. "Hey, Nabe… What do you think of my voice?"

Ainz poked at his vocal cords—or more accurately, the place where they would have been. He touched his gauntlets to the spot on his neck where he normally would have felt only metal, but there was something squishy inside, plus an out-of-place dampness inside his throat.

"To be quite honest, I don't much care for it. Not that it's an odd voice, of course. I merely prefer Lor— Mr. Momon's normal one. I understand the circumstances, but I do sometimes wish you would go back to your regular voice."

"I see… I think it's pretty nice and elegant. Neuronist chose it from among the voices of fifty people, so it's only natural that it

would have a certain charm."

Ainz suddenly groaned after remembering a time he'd heard a recording of his own voice, but his psyche was immediately stabilized.

"Is that so? I like your normal one better."

"Thanks, Nabe. Still, I didn't even think I would be able to equip this thing..."

Ainz poked his neck again, wondering if Narberal meant what she said or whether she was only flattering him. He felt the creature attached to his throat—a Lip Bug—move. If he were human, it probably would have tickled.

Did I just not know? Or did it get changed in a patch? These kinds of gaps in knowledge could prove dangerous. What a pain that I have to verify my information of this world and *what I learned in* Yggdrasil.

The creators of *Yggdrasil* wanted their players to enjoy the unknown. Hoping to give people motivation to experiment, the developers revealed a vast amount of data alongside a system worth tinkering with.

Thus, a true unknown spread out before the players.

There was hardly any useful info available about the map, nor details about the various dungeons, how to mine ores, what was edible, what types of magic beasts could be kept, and so on. Everything was left completely unexplained. In the world of *Yggdrasil*, players had to discover all this information themselves. To put it plainly, they even had to use trial and error to figure out what they could and could not equip.

Sure, there were walk-through sites and information pages, but most were nothing more than collections of widely known

facts or contained tips of dubious veracity. *Yggdrasil* was a game of exploring the unexplored, and any intelligence acquired was a treasure. There was no benefit to making it freely available to strangers.

The only intelligence that could be trusted came from the guild that a player belonged to or traded for with a dependable guild. The rest was generally considered to be worthless.

There was even a period when completely suspicious posts, to the effect of "I left my guild, so I'm revealing all the info we were hoarding," popped up.

Well, there was some true stuff buried among the lies, but…

There was one guild called The Flaming Third Eye.

It was formed by someone who ran a members-only paid *Yggdrasil* wiki. They committed the atrocious deed of sending spies to infiltrate elite guilds and steal intelligence. Only the admins didn't consider it reprehensible. They tacitly approved it as a valid way to acquire information, but that didn't fly with those who had been robbed.

When public fury reached its peak, the elite guilds formed an alliance and attacked The Flaming Third Eye. Players camped the spying guild's respawn points, their guild base, and the shrine in town, PK-ing them over and over every time their victims came back to life. In the end, The Flaming Third Eye was destroyed, to the point where their members scattered to the four winds.

Ainz fondly recalled how they opened up their wiki for free after that.

Well, there weren't any spies in Ainz Ooal Gown…but if it weren't for that whole mess, we might have had more members…

The incident triggered a freeze on welcoming new members into the guild, and they ended up topping out at forty-one, the smallest membership out of the top guilds.

In *Yggdrasil*'s later days, it was possible that there had been sites publishing only reliable information, but Ainz mostly pored over those back in the good old days when the guild Ainz Ooal Gown was at its peak. There hadn't been much useful info at the time.

My knowledge basically cuts off back then. I at least kept an eye on patch notes... There must be other Yggdrasil *players in this world besides me, though. I have to keep in mind that I might be at a disadvantage on the intelligence front.*

By gaining control of the Eight Fingers, their knowledge of the area surrounding Nazarick had jumped. Ainz had learned a lot about the kingdom as well as the empire, and now they were putting that knowledge to good use. But there hadn't been much about the sacred kingdom known as the Theocracy or the Council State, so they needed to cautiously gather intelligence on those.

"Sheesh. Thinking about it only brings up more anxiety. I'm ready to talk about something more cheerful." Ainz paused there and took a quick look around. "The empire sure is lively."

"Oh? It seems just like E-Rantel to me."

At Narberal's response, he looked around again.

"The streets are animated, and the people walking about have a gleam in their eyes—it's a sign that they feel their lives will improve over time."

Narberal, walking a fair bit behind him, was saying something along the lines of "Brilliant observation, Mr. Momon," but Ainz didn't reply. He was too busy feeling embarrassed over what he had said aloud. It was simply the feeling he got, but he didn't

trust his eyes.

It's not like I'm trying to be like Pandora's Actor or something… A "sign"? How could I say something so pretentious and not be mortified…? Do I think I'm a poet?

He had to act like a hero to some extent back in the kingdom, but it seemed like he was still performing even now.

With shame blooming on his face beneath his helmet—not that his bare skull could actually blush, of course—Ainz caught sight of the inn Fluder had recommended up ahead.

Even at a distance, it was clear that the best accommodations in the imperial capital were superior to those in E-Rantel. Still, that was only based on a practical impression of the facilities. If E-Rantel's best lodgings were a luxurious inn with a sense of history, then this building was more like a posh, newly opened hotel. Deciding which one was better came down to a matter of taste.

"Well, we can't be sure until we go in, but the atmosphere is pretty unmistakable."

Ainz gave a quick once-over to the proof that he was an adamantite-rank adventurer hanging around his neck before stepping toward the entrance.

Like in E-Rantel, there were muscular guards in leather armor stationed by the door. The men glanced suspiciously at Ainz and Narberal as they came through the arch, but their eyes popped open after resting on a certain point.

"A-are those real? It seems so, what with the impressive gear and all, but…"

Ainz heard one of the men conferring with the other in a low voice.

When he approached the guards standing at attention, who were unable to conceal their nervousness, one of them asked politely in an extremely strained voice, “Excuse me, Sir Adamantite-Rank Adventurer. I’m sorry to trouble you, but might I examine your plate?”

Ainz took his off for inspection.

“Does this inn refuse first-timers?”

“Yes. It’s true that to maintain a certain dignity, we do turn people away unless they have a suitable introduction. Naturally, adamantite-rank adventurers are an exception.”

After wiping his hands on his clothes, the guard bowed and gingerly received the plate with his hands.

Then he turned it over and read the words on the back.

“Sir…Momon of Raven Black?”

“That’s right.”

“Then you are all set. Thank you for presenting your adamantite plate.”

The guard was still very gingerly handling the plate as he returned it. Plates indicating adventurer ranks were made of the same metal as the rank name, so even this tiny name tag was worth an immeasurable fortune. It was extremely hard, so there was no way it would become scratched if it fell, but the compensation for losing it would be anything but small. There was no lack of stories where just as someone was about to return a gold plate, a crow-like bird called a kualamberat would snatch it out of their hands.

They weren’t parables for urging people to handle plates with care—it was a recounting of something that had really happened.

When Ainz took the plate back, the two guards' shoulders visibly relaxed in relief.

"I'll be going in now."

"Yes, sir. I'll escort you to the front desk."

"Oh, thank you."

The kingdom doesn't have a tipping system, so the empire is probably the same, right? Ainz wondered absentmindedly while one of the two guards led him inside.

They passed through the lobby, which had a floor that seemed to be made of marble, then headed for reception.

"This is adamantite-rank adventurer Sir Momon and his companion."

After the elegant man behind the counter signaled with his eyes, the guard bowed respectfully to Ainz and returned to his post.

"Welcome, Sir Momon. We appreciate you choosing us for your stay in the imperial capital."

The receptionist bowed deeply.

"No, don't worry about it. Anyway, I'll do one night for starters."

"Very well. Then would you sign the register please?"

Ainz wrote the signature he'd practiced dozens of times in the language of the kingdom.

"Thank you. And what kind of room would you like?"

Personally, Ainz was fine with an inexpensive room. But as ex-

pected, that wouldn't do.

I can't eat, so I'd be fine without food, but…

Ainz recalled various meals of this world: thick, green, sweet-smelling fruit water; something like pink scrambled eggs; sliced meat covered in a blue liquid. They all piqued his curiosity, but he couldn't eat any of them.

No desire for sex, food, sleep… There are a lot of handy things about this body, but I've lost a lot, too. It's too bad. Of course, if I had kept my flesh there's a good chance I'd be overindulging…

Suddenly imagining himself in bed with Albedo, his face twisted slightly—something that went further than a manager sexually harassing a female subordinate woman popped into his head.

Albedo seems to love me, but…it's complicated. If only I hadn't…oh!

"Sorry. Anything suitable is fine… By the way, is it all right if I pay in kingdom gold instead of trade currency?"

"Not a problem. In the first place, the exchange rate between kingdom and imperial currency is one-to-one."

"I see. Then I'll leave it up to you."

"Understood. We'll prepare a suitable room, Sir Momon. Would you mind waiting in the lounge?"

Ainz's attention turned toward the fifty-seat bar. It was overflowing with class. There was ample room between each comfortable-looking chair, and a bard was softly playing a tune.

"All food and drink in the lounge is on the house, so please make yourself at home."

It would seem that no matter the world, services rendered were always commensurate with the amount a customer paid—not that there was anything for Ainz to be particularly happy about in this case.

"Got it. Okay, Nabe, let's go."

Ainz took her over to the bar, and they sat in the nearest open seats.

There were several other guests in the lounge. Most seemed to be adventurers.

The amount a high-ranking adventurer made for completing a single job was extraordinary. Their standard of living improved as a matter of course and staying at a place like this became second nature.

It was probably like that in every city. After all, E-Rantel had been the same.

Ainz made sure the plate indicating his rank was clearly visible. If they become a topic of conversation, their reputation as adventurers would rise, and there was nothing wrong with that.

Conscious of the attention gathering on them, Ainz picked up the menu that had been left in front of them.

I can't read this…

He flipped through it haphazardly. The reason he'd opened it despite knowing he wouldn't be able to read it was to avoid looking suspicious.

He did have the reading item he'd lent to Sebas before, but he couldn't casually use it here.

"Sebas… Tsuare, hmm…"

As he recalled his subordinate's face, the name of the woman Sebas was involved with slipped out.

"What about her?"

"Oh no, it's nothing. I just wonder if she's getting along all right."

He'd left her care in Sebas's hands, but since Ainz had vowed to protect her, it was his role as manager to keep tabs on his employee.

"I don't think there are any issues. The head maid is in disciplinary confinement…so Sir Sebas is with her at all times, teaching her the various duties. Once she learns enough etiquette, her lessons will expand to include cooking and other tasks. Then, after determining her aptitude, she'll get her official assignment."

"I see. Well, as long as she has Sebas, she'll be fine, right? And…isn't it about time those two were released…? Albedo's anger has subsided somewhat by now, hasn't it?"

Narberal said nothing and lowered her head slightly.

Perhaps noticing a pause in their conversation, a waiter approached.

"Have you made your selections?"

"I'll have an ice machiatia. What about you, Nabe?"

"The same."

"You can order whatever you like, you know."

"Yes, but I'll have the same, please. Oh, but please make mine with extra milk."

"Understood."

The waiter bowed deeply and quietly withdrew.

A machiatia was a drink that was the same color as a caffe latte, which Ainz had often seen at inns in E-Rantel. The smell was also similar to a caffe latte, but he knew that both coffee and lattes existed in this world. Incidentally, Ainz didn't know what a machiatia tasted like. It went without saying, but he couldn't drink. He experimented once, but the contents simply sloshed out the bottom of his jaw and he couldn't sense any taste at all, so there was literally no point.

Nonetheless, the reason he'd ordered it was that he figured it was appropriate since the drink only seemed to be available at high-class establishments.

Wiping away some nonexistent sweat, he asked Narberal an obvious question.

"…Nabe, what does a machiatia taste like?"

He asked because he knew she'd had one before.

For a little while, she looked like she was thinking it over. The expression she had was the same as someone who wondered how best to describe the flavor of coffee to someone who had never drunk it.

"Hmm. It's similar to a café shakelato. But I don't enjoy the faint condensed milk aftertaste."

"…I see. Sounds tasty."

Shakelato? Never heard of it. There's a very good chance it's something original to this world.

"I would rate it as not bad."

Just as Ainz hummed thoughtfully, their drinks arrived.

“Go ahead. If neither of us touches our drinks, it’ll seem weird.”

He’d gotten so used to his helmeted lifestyle in the kingdom that he said this completely forgetting how unnatural it was to keep his helmet on even when someone brought him a drink.

“Thank you.”

“It’s fine if you keep drinking but please listen. I’m thinking about taking two days to see the imperial capital. I heard the central market is surprisingly well stocked, enough that you can have fun just walking around and browsing. And there’s also the northern market. I heard it sells mainly magic items and that adventurers often go there.”

That information was obtained from the Eight Fingers organization that they now dominated. There was more underground-type intelligence, but Ainz wasn’t planning on sticking his own nose into those affairs, so he’d only skimmed the documents.

“On the third day, let’s go to the Adventurers Guild. If possible, I’d like to make the acquaintance of the empire’s adamantite-rank adventurers, but if that’s impossible, let’s do a short, simple job to make ourselves known. If we can get out of here within seven days, that would be best. Any suggestions or anything?”

Narberal, who had stopped drinking to listen, shook her head.

2

The imperial capital was a physical manifestation of the empire’s power that contained multiple astounding sights, but almost everyone who visited marveled at one thing the most:

Nearly every road was paved with brick or stone.

None of the nearby countries—not even the Theocracy, though it was more advanced than most—could match the quality of these roads. Not that every city in the empire was similarly outfitted, but still, seeing the capital was enough for visiting diplomats to understand and admire the empire's potential.

The main street was especially grand. One of the imperial capital's largest roads, the main street was contiguous with the highway. Like ordinary roads, carriages and horses moved down the center, and pedestrians walked on the sides.

What set it apart were the various safety provisions. A simple guardrail was built on the boundary between the sidewalk and the street. Having the sidewalk a step up provided additional protection for pedestrians. There were also lamps along the side of the road that shone magic light on the streets at night, as well as many patrolling knights.

Down this street, the safest in the empire, walked a man with a silly grin on his face, humming a cheerful tune.

His stood about five-foot-seven. Agewise, he was probably almost twenty.

Blond hair, blue eyes, healthy tan skin—a man with features you could find anywhere in the empire.

He wasn't handsome. He was only average and wouldn't stand out in a crowd. Still, there was something appealing about him. Perhaps it had something to do with the faint, merry smile on his face and the confident way he carried himself.

With each step, each swing of his arms, the sound of chain links rubbing together came from under his fine, immaculate clothes. A perceptive passerby would gather that he was wearing mail.

He wore a sword on either hip—short swords, going by length. Knuckle guards covered the grips completely. The scabbards weren't elaborate, but they didn't look cheap. Farther around behind the swords, he wore a blunt weapon, a mace. He also had an armor piercer.

Carrying a weapon or two in this world was only natural, but there weren't many people who had three different attack types—piercing, cutting, and crushing—at the ready.

Someone who knew a thing or two would figure him for an adventurer. Someone who knew a little more would no doubt notice the lack of a plate adventurers usually wore around their necks and realize that he was a "worker."

Workers... Adventurer dropouts.

Adventurer jobs were contracted by the guild, investigated, and then assigned to adventurers of suitable rank. In other words, the guild screened requests at the earliest stage to make sure they were appropriate. It refused questionable jobs—ones that threatened civilian safety or involved crime—and sometimes blacklisted the requester. For example, the guild did everything in its power to block requests to procure plants used to make drugs.

The guild also rejected jobs that would disrupt the balance of an ecosystem. For example, it wouldn't send adventurers to proactively kill the monster at the top of a forest's food chain. If the monster was killed, the ecosystem's balance would be destroyed, and monsters might appear outside the forest. The guild wanted to avoid that. Of course, it was a different story if the monster at the top of the food chain left the forest and invaded an area where humans lived.

In other words, adventurers were like allies of justice.

But pretty ideals alone couldn't make the world go round.

There were people who simply wanted money, willing to do dangerous jobs for good rewards. There were even people who merely enjoyed killing monsters.

Those who pursued darkness rather than light, those who dropped out of the adventurer system—they were the ones people, with a mix of scorn and wariness, called workers.

But that didn't mean everyone who became a worker was that type of person.

For example, say a boy was seriously injured in a certain village. Could an adventurer who happened to be passing through heal his wounds for free using magic, yes or no?

The answer is no.

There was a rule that forbid adventurers from casting healing magic without charging the prescribed fee.

Normally, healing fell within the jurisdiction of the shrines. Sick people made an offering to receive the effects of healing spells. If adventurers disregarded that and healed people for free, the shrines wouldn't be able to stay in business.

So the shrines made firm requests to the guild to prevent that scenario.

Anyone who disagreed with that sort of rule had no choice but to become a worker.

From this perspective, the shrines seem almost like villains, but it was precisely because they had revenue from healing that they could work for the people without getting heavily involved in politics. The funds to train priests, exorcise undead, develop new healing spells, and generally make people's lives happier and safer also came from this revenue stream.

If adventurers cast healing magic for free, the shrines would

end up growing secular, their ideology tarnished.

Everything has two sides to it, a front and a back. That went for workers as well. Cases of workers who would overhunt for money so they could make cheaper medicine to help people were not nonexistent.

The grinning man—Hekkeran Termite—was a worker by trade.

"Wonder what I should buy…?"

The list of magic items he wanted was endless. He figured it would be better to prioritize defensive accessories for the moment. Though there was one more thing. It was unrelated but something he wanted.

"I'll save up money for that separately…and use what's left to buy magic items for adventures. Er, is that backward? I'll buy the items and any left over will go toward that."

Hekkeran scratched his head.

But then…

"As the one out front I should raise my magic resistance. Maybe it's about time to cut into my savings. Ah, but assuming we're going to the Katze Plain to make some cash exterminating undead, I should be on guard against toxins and stuff, so maybe items that boosts resistance to poison, paralysis, and sickness would be better."

Magic items were extremely expensive, and the types adventurers were liable to want—ones useful in combat—tended to cost even more. Unique items fetched prices that kept them out of Hekkeran's reach.

The items he had in mind at the moment weren't so extreme, but they would still cost a normal person's annual pay several

times over. It was an expensive shopping trip. He had to decide carefully.

His expression, a bit giddy in anticipation of a splurge, tightened up the moment his eyes met those of a knight.

A duo composed of two knights, wearing heavy and light armor respectively, stood on the corner keeping watch over the area.

This district, where the shrines to the Four Gods were located, was known for its strict security. The knights wouldn't question ordinary passersby, but Hekkeran sensed their gazes beginning to focus on the weapons hanging from his hips.

He didn't know how it was for adventurers, but as a worker with no support, he definitely didn't want to get in a fight with a knight.

His wish was heard, and he managed to traverse the shrine area without being stopped by the knights comparing faces with wanted flyers.

Hekkeran definitely had things to hide. Relieved, he shifted his gaze down the road and saw, quite a ways in the distance, a peculiar structure. At the same time, he heard a cheer on the wind—along with something like a bloodthirsty battle cry.

This unique building could only be found in the imperial capital: the Grand Arena. It was one of the city's most popular sights.

Since he saw his fill of blood in his line of work without going to the arena, and he wasn't interested in gambling, the place held little fascination for him. Still, as one might expect for the most popular entertainment for the masses (for the nobles, it was the theater), they were having a full house if the cheers were anything to go by.

“Must be the final round of the main fight, judging from the hubbub.”

The worker team Hekkeran led had appeared once for work in a program where they were pit against a succession of magical beasts. Surrender wasn’t allowed in beast fights; in other words, defeat meant death. Of course, people also died in human-on-human battles. There was rarely an arena day that ended without a death. No, the more people died, the more feverish the atmosphere.

And out of all the deadly events, the most popular was the tournament.

Hekkeran shrugged.

He’d lost interest completely. He didn’t feel like staring at a bloody, reeking battlefield on his day off. The only reason he couldn’t get it out of his head was that arena events made for good conversation starters in all sorts of places.

I never want to go to the arena again, but when I get back later, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to ask someone about the events.

Making a mental note, Hekkeran continued walking down the street lined with stores on either side. Before long he came upon the familiar sign of the Singing Apple.

It was a pub and inn said to have started with a gathering of bards who played instruments made from apple trees. The interior was surprisingly nice. No drafts, and the floors were polished clean. Granted, it cost a fair amount, too, but it wasn’t beyond their means. For Hekkeran’s group—no, workers in general—one could even say it was the best inn.

Certainly, compared to the most high-class inn the imperial capital had to offer, it was inferior on every level. But those fancy places were perfect for adventurers, not workers.

First of all, most of the jobs that came workers' ways were dirty, so requesters would hesitate to show up somewhere it would be conspicuous to visit. On the other hand, basing their operations in a rough part of town could invite trouble.

The other reason requesters liked the Singing Apple was that multiple worker teams could stay there. Since there was no guild for workers like there was for adventurers, people who wanted to hire a team had to track them down on their own. If they were scattered all over the place, business would have been inconvenient.

One advantage workers had was that by staying at the same inn, they developed a sense of closeness, and they ended up avoiding jobs that would involve killing one another.

Last but certainly not least, the food at the Singing Apple was delicious.

Hekkeran walked through the door with his mind on the evening meal. He thought it would be great if they served his favorite, pork stew.

The words that leaped into his ears when he went inside were not "Welcome back" or "How was your day?" from his friends.

"—Which is why I said I don't know!"

"Even so—"

"It's not like I'm her guardian or something. We're not family. How should I know where she is?"

"Aren't you friends? Even if you say you don't know, I can't just say, 'Oh, I see,' and be on my way. This is for work."

A man and woman were glaring at each other in the center of the pub and dining hall on the first floor.

Hekkeran knew the woman very well.

There was nothing special about her face and its currently hostile look. What attracted the most attention was her longer than normal ears. That said, they were only about half as long as an elf's. Yes, she was half-elf.

Elves were more slender creatures than humans, and it was clear from a glance that she shared their blood. She was thin overall, and neither her chest nor her backside had any trace of smooth feminine curves. She was flat as a washboard. From her build alone, even up close, she was liable to be mistaken for a man.

She wore formfitting leather armor. She wasn't carrying her usual bow and quiver, but instead, a dagger dangled from her hip.

Her name was Imina. She was one of Hekkeran's teammates.

But the man facing her was someone he didn't know.

He was bobbing his head to beg her pardon, but his eyes didn't seem sorry at all. On the contrary, there was something unpleasant in them. Judging from his humble attitude, though, he didn't seem to be a total idiot.

With his arms and chest practically bursting with muscles, his appearance alone made his presence seem like a threat. He was probably someone who wouldn't hesitate to use violence, but he couldn't hope to appeal to Imina by force.

Why? Because although she looked delicate, enough ability lurked within her that she could kill a cocky hoodlum with no trouble.

"But it's like I've been telling you!"

At this shrill, greatly irritated scream, Hekkeran interrupted. "Imina, what are you doing?"

Imina turned around, just then noticing him at the sound of his voice, and looked surprised.

It seemed that despite her superior ranger senses, she had lost herself in the conversation and failed to sense him. The oversight spoke to how agitated she must have been.

"...What do *you* want?" the man asked in a threatening tone, clearly considering Hekkeran an intruder. His eyes were hostile, and it seemed like he might start throwing punches at any moment. Of course, to Hekkeran, who had faced ferocious monsters and lived, the man's threats were worth about a wry grin.

"...He's our leader."

"Ohhh, well then. Hekkeran Termite, correct? I've heard so much about you."

The man's expression morphed dramatically into an ingratiating smile, making Hekkeran hate him just a bit.

He didn't know why the man had come, but he had made it all the way here—to their base. The possibility he didn't know Hekkeran was practically nonexistent.

The threat in the man's voice had likely been to gauge what kind of person Hekkeran was. If he backed off even a little, the man probably would have continued in that high-handed vein.

Some workers and adventurers had no problem slaying monsters but were reluctant to face humans. Of course, most of them would take a mile if given an inch and attack to kill.

He threatens me to decide who's top dog the moment we meet? I just can't...get myself to like this kind of guy.

Hekkeran knew that it was just one way of negotiating, an obvious technique. But he didn't like that sort of negotiation. He

liked his business straightforward with no hidden purposes.

"Shh. This is an inn, you know. There are other guests here, too, so could you keep it down?"

That's what he said, but actually, there were no other guests to be seen—or, for that matter, employees.

It wasn't as if they were hiding. To workers, this amount of commotion was like a morsel to go with their drinks. It was only by chance that no one was around.

Hekkeran gave the man a hard stare. It was too much to stand tall against the piercing eyes of a warrior who would have been mythril rank as an adventurer. The stranger shrank as if he were facing a magical beast.

"Oh no, no, no. My apologies, but I can't do that." The man lowered his voice slightly and was about to continue. The fact that he could do that under Hekkeran's gaze meant he had to be in some line of work—most likely the violent kind—that exercised strength.

What in the world is a guy like this doing here?

Granted, he himself did underworld work, but he didn't know this man nor had he any idea why he should be getting so much attitude from him. The guy definitely didn't seem to be fulfilling a request.

Confused, Hekkeran softened his eyes and decided to ask the man and hear it from him. "Who are you?"

"There you go. I came to meet an associate of yours, Mr. Termite, Miss Furt."

Only one person by the name of Furt came to mind.

I can't imagine her having anything to do with this guy. As

her friend who had fought through numerous life-and-death battles with her, that's what Hekkeran concluded. *So this must be some kind of trouble.*

"Arché? What about her?"

"Arché…? Oh, right. I was confused for a second because we only ever call her Miss Furt. Arché Eeb Rile Furt, yes."

"So?! What about her?"

"Eh, I'd just like a word with her… It's a private matter, so could you tell me what time she'll be back?"

"How should I know?" Hekkeran ended the conversation gruffly. He was so forceful, the man blinked a few times. "Is this conversation over?"

"I—I guess I have no choice. I'll just wait a little—"

"Get lost." Hekkeran jerked his jaw toward the entrance.

The man's eyelids fluttered again.

"I'll make myself clear. I don't like you, and it doesn't seem like I ever will. I can't stand having guys like that anywhere I can see."

"This is a pub, and I'm—"

"Yeah. You're right, it is a pub. A place where people get drunk and start fights…" Hekkeran grinned at the man. "Relax. Even if you get caught in a brawl and end up seriously wounded, we have a priest who can use healing magic. All you have to do is pay, and we'll fix you up."

"Of course, there's a surcharge. Otherwise, the shrines get upset. No way I want the shrines to send an assassin after us," Imina chimed in, wearing a villainous sneer. "But, well, for you

we can discount it. You'd be grateful for that, wouldn't you?"

"You heard her."

"Are you trying to threa…?" The man's words trailed off—because he saw the worker's expression change dramatically.

Hekkeran took a big step forward, closing in to the point that each other's faces filled their fields of vision.

"Huh? Threaten? Who, me? It's not so rare for a fight to break out in a pub, right? I'm giving you a friendly warning, and you say I'm threatening you? Are you trying to…start something?"

Hekkeran's face, the veins of his brow bulging, was one of a man who had survived countless life-and-death battles.

Defeated, the other man backed up a step but clicked his tongue as his last act of defiance. Then he set off hurriedly toward the door. He was frantically trying to keep up appearances, but it was clear at a glance that just beneath that surface, he was spooked. When he reached the door, he turned just his head and snapped at Hekkeran and Imina, "Tell the Furt girl that her time is up!"

"Yeah?"

At Hekkeran's near growl, the man practically tripped over his feet exiting the inn.

Once the troublesome roughneck was gone, Hekkeran's expression went completely back to normal. The change was so abrupt that if he said he had just been pulling faces for effect, it would have been believable. And in reality, Imina gave him a round of applause.

"So what was that about?"

"Not sure. He only asked the same stuff you heard just now."

“Ah, man. Then we probably should have gotten some more out of him first.”

Dang it. He put a palm over his face.

“Can’t we just ask Arché when she gets back?”

“…But I don’t really wanna go poking into her business.”

“Well, I get that, but you’re our leader, so suck it up.”

“I’ll exercise my authority as leader to have you ask her as a fellow woman.”

“Gimme a break! I don’t wanna do it, either.”

They winced at each other.

Among both adventurers and workers, a few things were commonly understood to be inappropriate.

First: asking about or investigating one another’s pasts.

Second: displaying excessive desires too openly.

Since many people became workers out of ambition, a little greed couldn’t be helped, but when it was blatantly over the top, there was a danger they would stop functioning as team players. For example, how easy would it be to trust someone to fulfill a request with lots of cash on the line or keep an important secret when they talked about how much they wanted money every day? Would it be possible to sleep in the same room with someone who was always saying how badly they desired the other sex? Teammates covered one another’s backs in situations where their lives were in danger. They had to maintain a minimum level of trust.

Being in some kind of obvious trouble dealt a serious blow to Arché’s dependability. This wasn’t an issue they could simply compromise on.

They were risking their lives together, so they couldn't let even a little uncertainty remain.

Irritated, Hekkeran furiously scratched his head. He didn't forget to wear a *this sucks* face. "I guess there's no helping it. Someone has to ask her."

"Thank youuu!"

He gave Imina a deadpan stare as she smiled and waved. "What? Trying to run away? You're asking her with me."

"Whaaat?" She grimaced but gave up when she saw that Hekkeran's expression didn't crack a bit. "Fine. I hope it's nothing too depressing, though…"

"Where did she go anyway?"

"Hmm? Oh, she's investigating that job."

"Aren't me 'n' Rober supposed to be doing that?"

They had returned to the imperial capital and were resting up after finishing a round of undead extermination on the Katze Plain when a new request popped up. The terms weren't bad, so they were leaning toward accepting.

The plan was for the best speaker of their bunch, Roberdyck, to look into the background of the requester as well as the nature of the job, while Hekkeran dropped by the imperial government office to pick up the reward for the undead extermination (a state undertaking) and then investigated the same things as Roberdyck via different sources.

Imina and Arché were supposed to be on standby at the inn.

"Not just that, though. Stuff like the history of the region and current conditions in the location's vicinity."

Hekkeran nodded that he understood. Arché may have dropped out of the Imperial Magic Academy, but she still had some connections. She would be best at collecting academic knowledge. Maybe she was digging through documents at the Wizards Guild.

"That's why she said she'd look into things with Rober. He has a fair amount of knowledge himself, plus shrine connections, you know? So what did you find out, then?"

"About that…," said Hekkeran as he sat down. Then he lowered his voice. "I can see why they're hiring workers. Or at least, based on the location, it'd be impossible to hire adventurers. But —and the requester mentioned this, too—it does seem to be true that they're talking to other teams as well."

"So it's actually a joint job? The requester must be expecting quite a return considering no one's ever set foot in these ruins."

"Gringham's team got the request, and he was saying the same thing. Heavy Masher seems to be thinking of going. We have to decide what we're doing by tomorrow, too."

Hekkeran's team only received the request and had yet to accept. They had until the next day to give their response, but if they were going to go, they had all sorts of preparations to make.

"And then this trouble comes up right when all this is going on… I wonder if it's related."

"I can't say for sure other teams aren't scheming because they think they can make a killing with this job, but we should talk to Arché first. If one of the other teams is giving her grief, we should either leave the job on the table or take it ready for a fight."

"We should fight, though, right? If someone tries to start something with us, we should beat on them till all their teeth are chipped away so they never do it again."

“That seems excessive…”

Imina was more cutthroat than she looked, but Hekkeran didn’t think her proposal was a bad idea.

If they were underestimated, he wouldn’t go as far as to say their careers were over, but people would definitely think less of them. That was something workers, with one foot in the underworld, had to avoid.

When he silently nodded with a hard glint in his eye, a creak echoed through the pub. Two figures entered through the wide-open door.

“Hey.”

“We’re back.”

A woman’s faint voice. And a moment later, so as not to talk over her, the voice of a well-mannered man came as well.

The first to enter was a skinny woman for whom the word *girl* might still be more appropriate.

She was probably in her mid to late teens. Her glossy hair was cropped shoulder length, and she had an extremely pretty face. She was less of a bombshell and more of an elegant beauty. There was something almost inorganic about her, doll-like.

She carried an iron rod longer than she was tall. There were numerous letters or symbols—something like that—inscribed on it. She wore a loose-fitting robe. Beneath that, she had thick clothes that gave her some degree of protection. It was a look that made it clear she was a caster.

The man was clad in full plate armor, although he didn’t go so far as to wear a close helmet. Over it, he wore a surcoat decorated with a sigil. A morning star was slung from his hip, and from his

neck hung the same sigil featured on his surcoat.

The outline of his face was rugged, but his short hair and bit of a well-trimmed beard gave him a clean-cut appearance. He looked to be around thirty.

These were Hekkeran's other teammates, Arché Eeb Rile Furt and Roberdyck Goltron.

"Oh, welcome back," Hekkeran replied stiffly. *Is this good timing or horrible?*

"Is something the matter, you two?" Roberdyck spoke in a politer tone than would be expected of the oldest member of the group. This stemmed from his personality but also because they were equals as workers.

"N-no, nothing."

"Th-that's right. Like he said."

Arché and Roberdyck squinted at Hekkeran and Imina flapping their hands.

"Uh, well, it's awkward to talk here. How about we go over there?"

Cutting to the chase with an earnest expression, Hekkeran pointed at a round table in the back of the pub. "Before that: drinks. Hey, Imina. Where's the innkeeper?"

Imina's expression seemed to say, *You're finally asking?* "Shopping. So I'm watching the place for him."

"Seriously? Then what should we do? Just drink?"

"I'm fine without."

"Yeah, me too."

"…Okay… Then…well, uh, shall we start our meeting, Foresight?"

With that, everyone erased all traces of their previous expressions. They leaned in around the table, bringing their faces closer together. Talking in this conspiratorial manner even when no one else was around was like an occupational disease.

"First, let's review the content of the request."

Hekkeran continued after confirming all eyes were on him. His tone was completely different from the one he'd used up until this moment. When it was time to get down to it, he got serious—as was only natural for a leader.

"The requester this time is Count Vemeer. The request is to survey some ruins in kingdom territory, a large building—possibly a tomb—that extends underground. The reward is two hundred in advance, a hundred and fifty after. It's rare for a contract to have such a large advance, and the amount overall is pretty big, too. There could also be additional compensation depending on the outcome of the survey; however, all magic items discovered go to the count. He'll allow the ones who found them to sell to him at half off the market rate. Jewels, precious metals, and works of art will be split fifty-fifty after determining their worth. He's been talking to other teams as well and may hire more than one—this we've confirmed."

Hekkeran filled Arché and Roberdyck in on what he'd heard and then returned to reviewing the content of the request.

"The survey will be three days at the longest. The assignment is to examine the ruins from various angles. The most important thing is that he thinks there are monsters there and wants to know what types and so on. Well, I guess it's a fairly standard ruins investigation…"

It was quite common for monsters to nest in deserted cities

and ruins. For that reason, worker team surveys were usually more like reconnaissance-in-force missions.

"...except for one major thing. Supposedly this tomb has yet to be discovered."

The moment he said it, the atmosphere changed.

A number of countries were destroyed two hundred years previously when the evil spirits went on a rampage—not only human countries but subhuman and grotesque nations as well. Sometimes there were extraordinary treasures—usually magic items—sleeping in their ruins. Discovering these treasures was the dream of any adventurer or worker.

That's why they all sought ruins that no one had ever looted. Foresight's chance was right in front of them.

"Also, the count will provide transportation for the way there and back, as well as food for the duration. I think that's it. Arché, Roberdyck, let's hear your report." Noting the gleams in his teammates' eyes, he passed the ball to the two who had been out gathering intelligence, starting with Arché.

"Then I'll go first. Count Vemeer's position at court isn't so great. There was a rumor that the Fresh Blood Emperor treats him coldly. I also heard that he's not hard up for money."

"We're supposed to survey these ruins in kingdom territory, but Arché and I both looked and couldn't find any rumors of ruins in that area or any indication that there was a city there in the past. If there really is a tomb there, it wouldn't be strange for some information to have been left behind, but...honestly, it doesn't even make sense for it to exist. Geographically, all that's over there is a little village. If we ask around the village, we might be able to learn something, but..."

"We can't do that. We're supposed to keep this under wraps as

much as possible, although he did say we don't need to do anything to anyone who sees us and that he'd rather we didn't."

"That makes sense. The area is directly under kingdom jurisdiction. One wrong step and we could make enemies of the Vaiself family and the whole country."

It was practically a crime to survey ruins in another country's territory, which was why this request had come to workers, not adventurers.

"So it's just a typical dirty job?"

"Yeah, but there is that one little problem," said Roberdyck.

"Well, yeah. If workers from the empire got rowdy in the kingdom, there would be all kinds of issues. If we're not careful, an incident might be possible to trace back to the count."

"In that case, there's one question."

"You mean where the tip about the ruins came from?"

"Yeah. It's weird no matter how you look at it."

"Really? It's near the Tove Woodlands, right? Couldn't it have just been discovered while clearing the forest?"

"Nah, that doesn't make sense. Look at this." Arché spread out a map and drew a circle around one location. "I don't know the details, but supposedly it's around here." She moved her small finger and tapped. "And here, there's a village, but it's pretty small. More like a hamlet. I highly doubt the people in that village have the wherewithal to clear the forest."

"Hmm, you're right. Clearing the dangerous woodlands would be nearly impossible for a tiny village like that… It could be that the kingdom undertook clearing the forest as a state project, but location-wise I can't imagine there's a reason they'd be so inter-

ested. And in the first place, there's no information floating around about a project like that."

The four of them racked their brains. *Should we really take this job?*

Because they didn't have the support of an organization like the Adventurers Guild, they needed to scrutinize the details of each job. First, they looked into the background of the requester; then they researched the location. Only upon then examining the content of the request would they finally take the job. Even after being so thorough, they often ran into trouble.

Workers risked their lives on their work. No matter how much they investigated it would never feel like enough, but they couldn't stay in the business unless they were thorough. If a job seemed too dangerous for them to handle, they had to leave the offer on the table no matter how good the terms were.

"…When I confirmed about the payment, he gave me the advance…" Hekkeran set a gold plate on the table. It was inscribed with lots of little letters. If they refused the job, they had to give it back. "I checked the gold ticket at the bank, and the full amount has been paid. We can cash it at any time."

Gold tickets, managed by the empire and guaranteed by the bank, were like checks.

The downsides were that to make them hard to counterfeit they were quite elaborate and took time to prepare and that there was a fee involved, but the benefits were innumerable.

In nearby countries, it was usually the Adventurers Guild that did this work, but in the empire, the tickets were backed by the state.

"So it's not a trap… Well, I figure we can assume they're serious if they've given us a gold ticket."

If it was a trap, there would have been no need to pay such a high advance. Of course, it could have been a ploy to make them think that and lower their guard, but Hekkeran couldn't think of a reason a noble he'd never even met would have something against him.

"I think—"

"Wait. Imina, I'm not finished. I want you to keep your mind a little more open."

"Sure. Then tell me: There are a few things I don't understand, even for a rush job. For example, hiring multiple teams. Why is he doing that?"

It was just as Imina said. Considering the time it would take to contact everyone, it was strange to hire multiple teams if he was in a hurry.

"Not sure. I don't know why it's a rush job in the first place. I haven't heard anything about any of his associates having some sort of emergency, and it's not like there's a ceremony or anything coming up in a few days. If anything, I imagine it's because he's worried the kingdom will discover the ruins? And hiring more teams yields a better chance of success?"

"Hey, Hekkeran. Did Gringham's team have any ideas?"

"You think he would tell me if they did? Plus, I had my hands full trying not to leak any of the information we'd acquired while asking him if he'd been contacted." Hekkeran shrugged as if saying he didn't know what else he could have done.

"It could be that the count has a rival."

"That is a possibility. That would explain the rush and the large number of workers. Oh, right. Something big happened in the kingdom recently. Not that it seems to have anything to do

with these ruins in the E-Rantel area…"

"Tell us anyhow, Rober…"

After prefacing his report with "I didn't really get much on it" and "It's basically a rumor," Roberdyck gave an uncertain description of the huge incident that had occurred in the royal capital. He said he would need more time to be able to say anything further, but sure enough, as it stood it was a rather unreliable, fractured account.

"Hmm. It might be related, but it might not be. For the time being, Arché's idea seems the most plausible. And you agreed, too, Rober."

"If we make that assumption, then…considering the multiple teams and the fact that it's a job in kingdom territory, it's possible that we'll be up against kingdom adventurers there by official request. We wouldn't be able to find that out just by asking around in the empire."

"The other thing we have to watch out for is a team requested by someone else—a hidden threat. No way I am getting my head cut off in my sleep right when we think we've accomplished our goal."

"Are adventurers a threat? They're better than the alternative. At least with adventurers, you can negotiate and it won't get ugly."

"If it's workers, people will die."

"What do you think, boss?"

Nothing had been left unsaid. All they could do now was speculate and make predictions.

"Before we decide, there's one thing I need to say…well, ask, I guess."

Hekkeran heaved a sigh, and Imina quietly held her breath.

“Arché, there was a weird guy here to see you.”

Arché’s almost artificial-looking expression contained barely any emotion, but now her eyebrows twitched. From that reaction, Hekkeran gathered that she knew who it was.

“When he left, he said… Er, what did he say?”

When he turned to Imina, he was met with a *What are you talking about?* look, but then she realized he really couldn’t remember and said in an exhausted voice, “He said, ‘Tell the Furt girl that her time is up.’”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

Everyone’s eyes turned to Arché. She took a breath and spoke reluctantly. “I’m in debt.”

“In debt?!” Hekkeran yelped in spite of himself. Naturally, he wasn’t the only one in shock. Imina and Roberdyck also looked surprised. They all knew how much each member made as workers because they split their rewards evenly. With that much going into their pockets, debt was inconceivable.

“How much?!”

“Three hundred gold…”

The others exchanged glances again.

In terms of an ordinary salary, it was an outrageous amount. Even as workers of their caliber, it was impossible to earn that in one job. Yes, the total for this job would come out to three hundred and fifty, but that was the reward for the entire team. From there, necessary expenses such as communally used consumables plus other team-based spending would be deducted. In the end they would each get about sixty.

Their team was fairly elite as worker teams went. In adventurer terms, they had ability equal to a mythril-rank team. How had she managed to go so far into debt that even at their class she couldn't pay it off in one job?

Arché probably sensed all their puzzled eyes. Her face was gloomy.

Of course, she didn't want to talk about it. But she couldn't not. If she cut off the conversation here, it wouldn't be surprising for her to be kicked off the team.

Perhaps realizing that, she finally spoke again. "I couldn't tell you because it's humiliating for my family. We were stripped of our noble status by the Fresh Blood Emperor."

The Fresh Blood Emperor—Jircniv Rune Farlord El Nix.

As the sobriquet implied, he was an emperor whose hands were stained with blood.

He'd assumed the throne directly after mourning his father, the previous emperor, who died in a freak accident. Immediately following the emperor's death, he broke off relations with one of the five great noble families—his mother's family—based on the suspicion that they assassinated the emperor. He then consigned each of his siblings one by one to oblivion. As if carried away on the winds of death that raged across the land, his mother also died in an accident around that time.

Of course, there was an opposition. But they were no match for the then crown prince, who had the force of the knights at his disposal. With that overwhelming military power behind him, he cleaned up the nobles as if he were reaping ears of wheat until only the ones who—whether sincerely or not—swore loyalty to the emperor remained, and his assumption of absolute centralized rule was complete.

But the Fresh Blood Emperor didn't stop there. He stripped many nobles of their status on the grounds of "We don't need any useless people," and instead, he promoted anyone with ability, including commoners, further solidifying his authority.

There were two things about this that astounded everyone. One was that the cleanup of opposing nobles, carried out on an impossible scale, was done with such inspired efficiency that it didn't decrease the nation's power. The second was that the emperor who had achieved it was still a young teenager.

Nobles who had been ruined by this man weren't hard to find, but—

"The thing is, my parents are still living as if they're nobles. Of course, they don't have the money for that. So they're borrowing from this sort of nasty guy to make up the difference."

The other three looked at one another.

They were doing a good job hiding it, but it was still possible to detect their irritation, displeasure, and anger.

I'm a good caster. I want to join you, a skinny kid holding a staff taller than she was had said. It seemed like Hekkeran wasn't the only one recalling how stunned they'd been back then—and how dumbfounded when they found out what she could do.

Since then, over two years of adventure after adventure, where one wrong step would have meant death, no matter how much money they made, it seemed like her gear had barely changed at all.

Now they finally knew why.

"Are you serious?! Want me to give them a real talking-to?"

"We should teach them the words of the gods. Or perhaps fists

first."

"Maybe their ears don't have any holes, and we need to start by making some!"

"Please wait. Since I've said this much, let me also say…depending on what happens, I might take my little sisters and leave."

"You have little sisters?"

Arché nodded, and the other three looked at one another again. They couldn't say it, but they all felt that maybe they should force her to quit this line of work.

Certainly, workers made more money than adventurers, but the catch was that the jobs could be extremely dangerous. Foresight meant choosing jobs only after making sure they were safe, but unforeseen issues cropped up all the time.

If things went poorly, it was entirely possible Arché could die and leave her sisters behind. But everyone felt they shouldn't poke their noses any further into her business.

"I see… Well, for now at least we understand your issue. We'll leave you to solve that, but as far as whether or not to accept this job…" Having said that much, he cast a cold look at Arché. "Arché, sorry, but you don't get to vote this time."

"You don't have to be sorry. It's no problem. I know I might not choose correctly, given my financial troubles."

Money can make you blind.

"Honestly, I'm just glad I'm not getting kicked off the team."

"What are you talking about? We're lucky to have a caster with your skills."

He wasn't just being polite. It was the truth.

Especially with regards to the talent she'd been born with. Hekkeran and the team had been saved by her miraculous eyes more than a few times.

To give a name to Arché's special ability, perhaps something like "magic detection eyes."

Apparently arcane casters had an invisible aura of magical energy surrounding them, and Arché could see it and know what tiers of magic they could use.

It was unnecessary to explain how useful it was to be able to gauge an opponent's power.

As far as Hekkeran and the others knew, there was only one other person in the empire with that ability—the greatest, most powerful wizard in the country, Fluder Paradyne.

In other words, Arché was Fluder's equal, if only when talking about their eyes.

"I can't believe the magic academy let such an outstanding student get away."

"Truly. You're so young, yet you can use the same tier as me. You might make it to tier six someday."

"That seems hard, but if there were even a slight possibility, I'd be happy."

When the atmosphere had relaxed somewhat, Hekkeran clapped his hands together. The dry sound drew everyone's eyes.

"So, are we going to take this job or not? Roberdyck?"

"I'm fine with it."

“Imina?”

“Why not? We haven’t had a proper job in quite a while.”

Worker jobs didn’t come along so often. Indeed, the previous week they’d been exterminating undead on the Katze Plain, but they were simply paid for how many they killed. Taking on a job from a requester was a bit different.

“Then—”

“If you’re worrying about me, please don’t. Even if we don’t take this job, I’ll find another way to make money.”

The three of them exchanged glances, and then Imina grinned. “No way! Hadn’t even crossed our minds. I mean, it’s not a bad job, you know. We want that fat reward! Right, Roberdyck?”

“That’s right. We’re not doing it for you but for the many items sleeping in those undiscovered ruins. Isn’t that so, Hekkeran?”

“Like the man said, Arché, although it’s too bad we won’t get famous as the ones to discover them.”

“Thank you, everyone.”

Arché bobbed her head, and the others looked at one another and smiled.

“Okay, so Arché will come with me to cash the gold ticket. You two, start getting the stuff for our adventure ready.”

They couldn’t slack on checking their magic items, making sure they had rope and oil—all the equipment they’d need for their trip. It was appropriate work for methodical Roberdyck and Imina with her thief skills. Or maybe Hekkeran was just awful at it.

“Okay, let’s get going, but Arché…”

Arché cocked her head as if to say, *What?* and Hekkeran posed the question on his mind.

"You know, we won't make enough on this job to pay back your debts."

"It's okay. If I pay that much, I can get him to wait a little longer."

"We could lend you the rest!" Imina chimed in.

"Sure. You can just pay us back after the next job," added Roberdyck.

They wouldn't just give it to her; that much was a given. The members of Foresight were equals.

"I'll pass. Really, my parents should be the ones paying it back, but I'll put in my time and do my filial duty."

"That makes sense."

The four of them exchanged glances and then set about their respective tasks.

3

In one district of the imperial capital was a high-class residential district lined with old yet sturdy, formerly gorgeous mansions on spacious plots. As one might expect, the masters of these historic yet by no means outmoded houses were mostly nobles.

A noble's residence was a status symbol, and one who didn't decorate their house because they felt it was a waste of money

would be ridiculed.

Furnishings, jewelry, clothing, house, garden—these elegantly ornamented items were the equivalent of military might on the battlefield of noble society. They accurately conveyed not only a noble's wealth but also the breadth and depth of their social connections. Living in a shabby house was enough to be looked down upon. For that reason, unless they were of a military temperament and had next to no interest in politics, nobles decked out both themselves and their houses. In a way, it was like a demonstration of martial power, one only people with enough clout could make.

Looking around the area, a few things were apparent.

The neighborhood was in a very safe part of the capital and was quiet, but the silence seemed to stem from something else. There were many houses that lacked any human presence.

And in fact, there wasn't anyone in those houses. They'd been abandoned by former nobles, who could no longer maintain them, stripped of their rank by the Fresh Blood Emperor.

Amid the empty boxes were some houses that were still inhabited, but their outer walls had fallen into disrepair and the pruning of the trees in the yard had been neglected.

In the sitting room of one of those houses, wearing a hard expression, Arché was welcomed by her parents. Their faces had the well-bred noble look, and they wore well-tailored clothes.

"Oh, welcome home, Arché."

"Welcome back."

Before replying to them, she shifted her gaze to the piece of glasswork on the table. It was an extremely elaborate sculpture shaped like a cup and had the prim air peculiar to luxury items.

Her brow twitched because she had never seen it before.

"What's that?"

"Ah, this is a piece by the artist Jean—"

"That's not what I'm asking. This wasn't here before. Why is it here now?"

"Well, because we bought it this morning."

Her father's remark, as casual as if he were discussing the weather, sent a wave of shock through Arché's body.

"For how much?"

"Hmm… I believe it was fifteen gold pieces. A steal, don't you think?"

Arché's shoulders slumped. It was a natural reaction for anyone who had just used their advance to pay off part of a debt only to return home and find that same debt had increased once more.

"Why did you buy it?"

"Any noble would become a laughingstock if they didn't spend money on things like this."

Arché couldn't help but give a hostile glare to her father, with that proud look on his face.

"We're not nobles anymore."

At her words, his face hardened and flushed. "You're wrong." He thumped the table. Perhaps it was lucky that since the sitting room table was so thick, the glass cup didn't budge. Arché had no problem with it breaking, but it probably wouldn't have even fazed her father. He would just think, *Well, it was only fifteen gold pieces…*

While Arché suppressed her irritation, her father continued shouting, spittle flying from his lips. “Once that wretched fool dies, our family will resume our status as nobles! Our house has supported the empire for over a hundred years! I will not forgive this interruption of our glorious history! This is an investment for the future, and besides, by showing off our power like this, we can send a message to that villain that we won’t give in!”

Idiot.

That was Arché’s opinion of her excitable, arrogant father. “That villain” was surely the Fresh Blood Emperor, but he probably didn’t care one bit about their family. Plus, shouldn’t there have been a better way to get back at him?

Prisoner of his own little world, her father couldn’t see outside.

Arché shook her head weakly.

“Would you two please stop fighting?”

Her mother’s leisurely tone triggered a temporary truce.

She stood up and handed Arché a small bottle. “Arché, I bought you some perfume.”

“How much was it?”

“Three gold pieces.”

“Oh…thanks.”

That makes eighteen. She calculated the total in her head as she thanked her mother, took the bottle that had barely anything in it, and put it away in a secure pocket.

Arché had a hard time being cold to her mother. And from a certain perspective, things like perfume and makeup could be

considered smart purchases.

If she dressed up and attended the right party, a powerful noble might fall in love with her. The idea that a woman's happiness was in marriage, pregnancy, and child-rearing was considered correct by most nobles. Buying those sorts of things as an investment toward that end wasn't so wrong.

Still, she didn't feel it was appropriate to be shelling out for perfume right now, considering the family's situation. An ordinary household could sustain itself for a month on three gold.

"I've told you a million times, but you shouldn't waste money. Only buy the minimum daily necessities."

"But I just told you! This *is* a necessity!"

Her father cast an exasperated look at her, his face splotchy with rage. They'd had this conversation any number of times, and it always ended in a compromise. Arché partly blamed herself for things having gotten this bad. If she had made some kind of power move earlier on, this wouldn't have happened, and she wouldn't have caused trouble for her teammates in Foresight.

"I'm not contributing any more money to this household. I'm taking my sisters and leaving."

This quiet announcement made her father furious. *His first thought was probably, "Then who'll make the money?"* she thought icily.

"Who do you think has supported you up until now?!"

"I've repaid my debts to you," she declared. The money she had given them already was quite a sum. And it was money made on adventures that was supposed to go toward growing stronger with her friends. Of course, everyone was free to use their rewards how they liked, but there was a tacit understanding that a

good part of the funds would go toward building up their strength.

What had her friends thought of her, seeing that she never bought new gear?

Not upgrading her equipment meant that one of the team's members was weaker than the others.

But no one ever said anything to her about it. She'd taken advantage of their goodwill.

Arché scowled fiercely. It was a gaze that conveyed her tenacious will, and her father averted his eyes like a coward. Of course he did. There was no way Arché, who had survived any number of life-and-death battles, could lose to a foolish noble.

With a glance at her father, who had nothing more to say, Arché left the room.

She closed the door behind her and sighed. Then a voice addressed her, as if it had been waiting for the chance.

"Miss."

"Jimes, what is it?"

Jimes was the family's longtime butler. His wrinkled face was taut with worry. She knew why immediately—because she'd seen the expression several times since her father was stripped of his noble status.

"It pains me to bring this sort of thing up with you, miss, but…"

Arché interrupted him with a raised hand to indicate he needn't say any more. She had the feeling it wasn't a conversation they should have right outside the sitting room, however, and they moved a short distance away.

Arché took a small leather pouch from her breast pocket and opened it. There were various gleams inside. Most of them were silver and then copper. Precious few were gold.

"Will this be enough somehow?"

When Jimes took the pouch and examined its contents, his face softened slightly. "This should…suffice for my salary and to repay the merchant."

"Good." Arché sighed with relief that ends would somehow meet, even though the family was hovering near bankruptcy.

"You couldn't stop him from shopping?"

"No. The seller came with a noble he knows. I did try a few times, but…"

"I see…"

They both sighed.

"I wanted to ask you… If I were to let all the staff go, what is the minimum amount of money I would need to prepare?"

Jimes's eyes widened slightly, and then he smiled sadly. The fact that he wasn't shaken must have meant he'd been expecting it.

"I'll make an approximate calculation and inform you later."

"Thanks."

Just then they heard the sound of scampering footsteps coming down the hall. Arché didn't have to look to know who it was.

The corners of her mouth relaxed into a weak smile, and she turned around to see a single figure dashing toward her. It plowed straight into her without slowing.

The one who leaped at her was a girl scarcely over three feet tall. She must have been about five years old. Her eyes looked very much like Arché's. She puffed out her pink cheeks in disapproval.

"You're so hard!"

She wasn't calling Arché's chest flat.

Clothing for adventures that made generous use of treated leather provided good defense. The pieces covering Arché's chest and abdomen were particularly tough. That's what the little girl had jumped into—she probably felt like she'd been crushed.

"Are you okay?" Arché caressed her face and patted her head.

"Yep, I'm okay, Arché!" The little girl grinned, and Arché smiled at her younger sister.

"…I'll take my leave."

Arché nodded at the butler as he withdrew to give them space, and then she ruffled her sister's hair.

"Uré, running might not…" Having said that much, she hesitated. It was absolutely improper for a noble's daughter to run down the hall, but as she had told her father, they weren't nobles anymore. Wasn't it fine to let her run around, then?

Arché's hand hadn't stopped moving during that time, and the little girl getting her hair messed up erupted in carefree giggles.

Arché looked around and saw that the other one wasn't there. "Where's Koudé?"

"In our room!"

"Oh yeah? …There's something I want to talk to you guys about. Let's go find her."

"Okay!"

Her smile's so cheerful. It's my job to protect it. With that strong sense of mission, Arché took her sister's hand.

She could feel the warmth of the little hand completely surrounded by her own.

"Your hands are hard, Arché."

Arché looked at her free hand. Cut numerous times during adventures and calloused, they were no longer the hands of a daughter of a noble family. She didn't regret it, though. Her hands were proof of her time with her friends, Foresight.

"But I love them!"

Arché smiled as her sister squeezed her hand. "Thanks."

•

The imperial capital's northern market was bustling with activity as usual. But since most of the shoppers who came here weren't ordinary folk, the crowd wasn't jam-packed like the central market; here it was possible to walk along the rows of stalls and browse without bumping into people.

Hekkeran and Roberdyck arrived and began strolling around, relaxed in the familiar atmosphere. They could be so easygoing, as if the words *on guard* had been erased from their dictionary, because there were no pickpockets or other robbers—it was possibly the safest place in the whole safe capital.

"So, Hekkeran, what are we going to buy?"

"First, healing items. Pricewise, I'm aiming for Slight Cure Wounds wands or maybe Middle Cure Wounds wands… But not if they have only half their uses left. Since we're going to a tomb, we might end up using them on undead, too. Besides those, we'll

want basic undead countermeasures, items that will work against poison and disease. If possible, I'd like to make sure we have stuff that will work against negative energy and incorporeal undead, too... Items with permanent enchantment are expensive, so any scrolls with the right magic will do fine."

Wands were items containing multiple uses of a spell, so the rate per cast ended up cheaper than single-use scrolls. Thus, it was possible to save money by buying wands of commonly used spells, like ones to heal wounds.

"Is that so? I thought maybe you were here to buy a gift and that you invited me to get my opinion."

"A gift?"

"...Never mind, Hekkeran. Let's find those bargains!"

"...R-right."

The shops at this open-air market carried a lot of shabby-looking items.

Most of the stalls were a single thin board as a display table with only one thing on it. Almost nothing was new; they were mainly scruffy, worn-out, secondhand items.

The keepers of these shops seemed fairly capable themselves, for the most part. With thick biceps or the look of a magic caster, these sellers seemed like they would be better at battle than setting prices or haggling. At first glance, it appeared that security guards were manning the shops, but they really were the shopkeepers—for this one day only. Normally they made their livings as adventurers or workers. In other words, they were in the same line of work as Hekkeran and Roberdyck.

They were selling things they had been using or items they had discovered on their adventurers but which wouldn't be used by

someone on their team—stuff they didn't need. Finding a buyer themselves rather than selling to a merchant who specialized in magic items or the Wizards Guild (since there wasn't a broker fee) was better for both sellers and buyers, even considering the small fee paid to the commerce guild to set up shop.

That's why most workers and adventurers like Hekkeran and his friends tended to come here first. Some people even showed up daily during their stay at the capital to hunt for deals.

It was also the reason there was virtually no crime in the northern market. Who would willingly attempt to prey on shopkeepers specialized in combat? They would deserve whatever awful things happened to them.

After looking around for a little while, Hekkeran and Roberdyck's faces weren't grim, but they weren't cheerful, either.

"Nothing, huh?"

"Nothing."

The items on sale were ones their owners didn't need, so naturally Hekkeran and his team didn't need most of them, either. If they had been lower-rank adventurers or green workers, they might have bought some things, but unfortunately, there was nothing they wanted, even with the needs of their two other teammates in mind.

"That's too bad. Maybe it would have been faster to just buy things normally."

"Well, we came hoping for deals. Can't help it if there aren't any. This sort of persistent frugality is step one of saving money, you know."

"Saving money, hmm…? What do you think will happen, Hekkeran?"

“I’d be a super-elite caster if I knew what you were talking about just from that… Arché, right?”

“See, you know.”

“Well, I was kinda able to guess from the thread of our conversation…”

“So you know what I’m trying to say then, right?”

“You mean that this might be our last adventure?”

“Please don’t say it in such a depressing way.” Roberdyck winced. “But I suppose you’re not far off. Arché was talking about taking in her little sisters. If that happens, it won’t be very easy for her to go adventuring.”

“Yeah, guess not. She’ll have to pick up a trade or find some job where she can make money without traveling.”

“I’m sure she’ll find a job fast enough. She’s a caster who can use tier-three spells. I don’t know how many little sisters she has, but she should be able to make enough to support a family of three or four.”

“Yes, most likely. She wouldn’t say she would take them in if she didn’t have the means.”

“So then we’re the ones with the problem. If our wizard leaves the team, what’ll we do to get a new member?”

“Wonder if there are any free tier-three arcane casters around.”

“Please save the dreams for bedtime… If we were adventurers, we could have the guild find someone for us, but looking on our own…it will mainly come down to luck.”

The pair looked at each other and sighed in unison.

The death of a friend, being unable to keep up, or being more capable than the rest of the team—those were the types of reasons adventurers and workers quit their teams. It certainly wasn't an uncommon occurrence. On the contrary, being with the same team for one's entire career was quite rare, and most people switched two or three times.

That went for Hekkeran, Roberdyck, and Imina as well.

But that was an entirely different issue from whether they would be able to easily find an arcane caster, not to mention one who could use tier-three spells.

"We could get someone who can use tier two and train them up?"

"Shouldn't that be our last resort? I'd rather not train someone if we can help it."

"Poaching someone would be tricky. And so many workers are morally bankrupt to begin with; we really need to be careful who we team up with. No combat maniacs or whatnot…"

"In that sense, our team is kind of a miracle."

"The unusual case of a team that came together simply because we all just wanted money. Well, I guess we found out about Arché's issues after the fact, so not quite."

"Miss Arché showed up right as we were trying to figure out what to do about our final member…" Roberdyck was looking off into the distance.

Hekkeran figured his eyes must have been doing the same thing.

"I even remember what I was drinking that day… Her appearance was so timely it made me think that perhaps the gods formed our team."

“Really? Wow. I don’t remember it as well as you, Rober. What were you drinking?”

“Water.”

“That’s what you always drink! You basically never touch the hard stuff. I’d hate it if you drank as much as Imina, but…”

“Imina sure is a handful when she’s drunk. Anyhow, it’s not my fault I can’t stomach it.”

“Well, yeah, you turn red, blue, and then white from just one glass. I wonder how it would have been if you hadn’t protected yourself against poison the first time you drank.”

“Maybe you’d have a different teammate standing here instead of me. Some people die from alcohol, you know.” Roberdyck shrugged. “Let’s get back to the topic at hand. What should we do if Arché leaves? Is there a chance we’ll disband?”

“If we can’t find another member, that’ll be our only choice, won’t it? It’s too dangerous to take jobs with only three of us… Maybe we could go back to being adventurers?”

“I absolutely refuse to follow the shrines’ rules when all I want to do is save people. If it came to that, I would just retire.”

“Retire…? That wouldn’t be so bad, either.”

“I have some money saved up. I’d like to do some kind of work that is useful, that helps the weak. I wouldn’t mind working the fields in a frontier village and acting as a pseudo-priest. What would your plan be, Hekkeran?”

“Hmm, what would I do?”

The corners of Roberdyck’s mouth tweaked upward. “…Is it all right for you to decide that all on your own?”

It took a little while for Hekkeran to see what Roberdyck was getting at. Finally the implication sunk in, and his face twitched. “What?!”

“Heh-heh.” It was a wicked laugh. “Did you think we wouldn’t notice?”

“Ahh, ahh. Ahh! Ahh! But it’s not like we were trying to hide it. It just wasn’t the right time, you know? …So that’s what you were talking about with the gift.”

“Who made the first move?”

“Hey, Roberdyck! Look over there!”

Hekkeran was pointing to a pair of people browsing items in a splendid tent.

One was a warrior clad in raven-black armor. A crimson cape hung down the figure’s back, draped over huge swords.

“Quite a contrived way to change the subject… Well, that’s fine. I’ll have you tell me all about it later. Mhmm, that is some impressive gear. If the person inside is worthy of it, they would be one skilled warrior. Maybe someone we know got new armor?”

“I’m not positive, but I don’t think it’s anyone I’ve seen around the imperial capital before. And besides, see that woman standing there kind of hidden? She’s a new face.”

“I don’t have a good angle. Who’s more beautiful, her or Miss Imina?”

“Don’t go there, man. I can’t be answering a question like that… But honestly, the lady standing over there is prettier.”

“Miss Imina is quite a pretty lady. If you, head over heels in love, would say that, then… I see. They must be travelers or adventurers who ended up here. Or maybe they’re going to start

with a fresh base in the city."

"But they're shopping around the daily-use magic items. Isn't that weird?"

There were all sorts of enchanted goods inside the splendid tent but not the kind adventurers or workers would use—more just for everyday use. For example, one was a Refrigerator—a box that could be filled with chill to protect items held inside. There was also a Fan, which created a nice breeze.

Most of these items had been thought up two hundred years ago by the minotaur known as the All-Talk Sage.

He was a warrior, and the nickname came from the fact that he proposed lots of items but didn't have the ability to make them, nor could he explain why they were shaped like they were or by what logic he'd arrived at them.

Supposedly, he was a first-rate warrior, though, to the point where there were still fishy-sounding legends being told, saying he could whip up tornados with a swing of his ax and split the earth if he struck it. He was also known for mobilizing the large country of minotaurs, who thought of humans only as food, to elevate the human race to the status of slave laborers.

Adventurers usually lived in inns, so it was rare to see one interested in buying household items thought up by that subhuman. They were difficult to take on adventures.

"It's not so strange. The empire's magic technology is fairly advanced. You can buy things cheaper than in other countries, so perhaps they estimate shopping is worth it even figuring in the effort of taking their purchases home."

"Ahh, I see. That could be."

"Certainly if you figured us as the standard customer, it'd be

odd, but I don't think it's so weird for someone passing through."

"Yeah, that makes sense. When I think of it that way, I understand why they look so invested."

The warrior in the armor was inspecting all the magic items very thoroughly—opening and closing the doors, holding things up, flipping them over. Hekkeran thought he could see beads of sweat forming on the merchant's forehead.

"Maybe we should get that invested in our own search."

"Yeah."



Chapter 2 Butterflies Caught in a Spider's Web

CHAPTER 2

Butterflies Caught In A Spider's Web

1

A number of workers gathered at the count's place before dawn. Including Hekkeran and the rest of Foresight, who were the last to arrive, there were eighteen. They were all skilled workers from the imperial capital who had been rounded up for this job.

The teams observed one another with appraising eyes, keeping a short distance between groups. The way they all turned simultaneously to look at Foresight when they arrived was quite a sight, in a way.

"Ah, I've seen a few of these faces around. Or actually, didn't we just run into Mr. Beetle over there on the Katze Plain?"

"Huh? Didn't I tell you at the inn? Gringham's team got the request, too. Did I not say that? I'm pretty sure I said something to that effect… But anyhow, behold this concentration of the empire's most famous workers! A round of applause for our requester's deep pockets!"

"We can do without the applause. More importantly, it looks like the team leaders are over there."

Though the workers were split up by team, three people had gathered to exchange information.

"Gringham's there, so yeah. Okay, I'll go say hello."

"…What the—! Ugh. *He's* here, too? Ahh, I see. So those elf girls are… He's the worst. Drop dead, shitbag," Imina snapped. She was only murmuring in a low voice but with enough hostility that Hekkeran and the others quickly looked around.

“Miss Imina!”

“I know, Rober. We’re teammates for this job… I just don’t want to see his face.”

“I don’t like that guy, either.”

“When it comes to like or dislike, I’m not fond of him, but we still have to watch our attitudes.”

Hekkeran got in between Imina, whose face said, *Oh, be quiet*, and Roberdyck, and he playfully shrugged his shoulders. “Hey, hey, I gotta go say hi, so don’t talk like that now. I won’t be able to keep it off my face!”

“Good luck, leader.”

At Roberdyck’s cheer, he pulled a face and said, “Ya, sure, it’s just me.” Then he approached the other three leaders.

The first one to greet him as he neared was a worker in silver full plate armor. Since the armor was bizarrely rounded and had huge shoulders, it made the man look less like a person and more like an upright rhinoceros beetle.

Judging from the horn jutting out from the forehead of his close helmet, that’s what he was going for.

However, one thing he probably wasn’t going for was the impression that a child had stood a rhinoceros beetle up on two feet—his legs were short. To put it kindly, he stood with his short, stout legs planted firmly on the ground—like a dwarf warrior might.

“As I suspected, thou hast come, Hekkeran.”

“Hey, Gringham. Yeah, the terms were pretty good.”

He raised a hand to wave at the other two. The greeting was a

bit relaxed for the situation, but they didn't seem to be offended. The four of them were wildly different ages and experience levels, but they were all capable workers.

"If you only brought"—Hekkeran looked at Gringham's team and counted before continuing—"five people, where are the rest of your members?"

"They're resting, washing away their fatigue. And due to the injuries incurred during the recent work in which thou also participated, various repairs and purchases need be made."

This man, Gringham, was the leader of Heavy Masher, a large worker team of fourteen.

Naturally, there were benefits to having so many members. Since they could take a number of different approaches to any given job, Heavy Masher could act very practically. It was a major strength to be able to customize the team to fit individual requests.

But there were also drawbacks. Since rewards were shared, each member's take was smaller. And it also took more time to make decisions, so they were less agile.

With those pros and cons, depending on the workers' personalities, it wouldn't be surprising for a team that big to split apart, so the fact that Gringham could hold them all together was an indication of his excellent management ability.

"Hmm. Sounds tough. Maybe you should join our team; then you won't have to get cursed for making so much without them."

"What a daft proposal. A leader must reward his team when their work is done. So, albeit unfortunately for thee, we'll take the liberty of achieving excellent results."

"C'mon, gimme a break. And you can totally talk like normal,

you know!”

Gringham flashed a smile.

Sensing some negative sentiment, Hekkeran shrugged his shoulders and turned to another man. “I think this is the first time we’ve properly met.”

When Hekkeran offered his hand and greeting, the man took it.

He had strong, firm hands.

His tapered eyes moved to focus on Hekkeran.

“Foresight. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

His voice was cool, like the clear ringing of a bell. Well, it did go with his looks.

“You too, Tenbu.”

There were probably no workers who hadn’t heard of this genius warrior. He was undefeated at the arena. In one sense, his team, Tenbu, was made up of just himself—which is why Imina had made such a face when she saw him.

“I’m happy to be teaming up with a genius swordsman said to be equal to the kingdom’s strongest, Gazef Stronoff.”

“Thank you. But perhaps you meant that soon *he* will be equal to *me*, Elya Uzruth.”

“Ohhh, well then!”

Elya smiled faintly, producing an expression that could be read as arrogance. In response, Hekkeran blinked several times to conceal the emotion that threatened to appear in his eyes.

“I’ll be expecting a lot out of your sword in the ruins.”

“Yes, please do. I just hope there are some monsters in there who will put up a fight.” He patted the weapon on his hip.

“We don’t know what kind of monsters are in there. Could be dragons!”

“How terrible. If something as powerful as a dragon showed up, we might be in for a tough battle, but I’ll show you how to win.”

Hekkeran smiled with his mouth only, saying, “I see, I see,” and continued to suppress his emotions while observing the reaction of the remaining leader in his peripheral vision.

Given the rumor that Elya could win against an orichalcum-rank adventurer in a duel of blades, it wasn’t so simple to declare his response simple bragging. Besides, it was good to have confidence in one’s skills and crucial for workers to emphasize their abilities.

Of course, that was only if one didn’t try too hard and fail.

Dragons were the most powerful race in the world.

They flew through the sky and loosed their “breath.” Their scales were hard, and their physical ability was unequaled. As they aged, they learned to use magic. They boasted life spans to which those of humans could never be compared, and the wisdom they accumulated was enough to make even sages prostrate themselves before them.

It was precisely because they were so strong that they appeared in stories so often, whether as an evil enemy or an ally to the hero.

The Thirteen Heroes’ adversary in their last adventure had been a divine dragon. Heroes’ ultimate opponents were often

dragons.

If Elya was arrogant enough to suggest that they take on a dragon just because it came up in conversation, the only possible response was shock. His theatrical delivery might have indicated a joke, but unfortunately his eyes were dead serious. How inflated could his ego possibly get?

Considering that they didn't know what kind of monsters were in the ruins, Hekkeran was sure judging Elya's mentality a liability to the team was the right move. *I should keep my distance from him.*

Collapsing is his prerogative, but if he leans on us, he'll be a burden, Hekkeran noted with a faint smile, and he decided to amend their handling of him—they would use him and dump him.

"So those are the members of Foresight, huh? Ohh?" Contempt and prejudice appeared in Elya's eyes when he saw Imina.

It was rumored that Elya was from the Slane Theocracy, a religious nation where they believed humans were most sacred. Its citizens tended to consider those with nonhuman blood to be a notch inferior.

To a man like that, the idea that the half-elf Imina was participating in this job on the same level as him was probably offensive. *This is why people think that rumor is true… But if he was from the Theocracy, he'd have a baptismal name. Oh, right, but some people say he discarded it…*

Grumbling in his head, he made sure to say something, as well. "…Hey, make sure you keep your hands off my teammates!"

"Of course. We're comrades for this job. I'll be good."

"I want to believe you."

Elya was like a child with power who had only matured in size, or rather, his mental unbalance was palpable. Hekkeran had given his warning, but he still got bad vibes that didn't let him rest easy.

"What? Please do. Then, getting back to our original topic, I'd like to pass on taking command during our trip. Barring extremes, I'll follow the orders of whoever leads the group, and I don't mind being the vanguard in a fight. I'll conquer everything with my katana."

"Okay, got it."

"...Then I'll be getting back to my team. If you need anything, please call me."

Elya bowed and walked away.

Hekkeran nearly scowled when he saw the multiple women waiting for him, but he couldn't let his feelings show. There were times when other people knowing one's emotions was a disadvantage. If he was going to get caught in that kind of spot, he wasn't fit to be a team leader.

He buried his reaction and erased his expression.

Shifting his gaze as if averting his eyes from something unclean, he greeted the last remaining team leader.

"Hello, sir. You're looking well."

"Hallo, Hekkeran. You're lookin' fine yourself!" The whistling quality of the man's voice was due to the fact that he'd lost most of his front teeth.

Palpatra "Green Leaf" Ogrion...

His nickname came from the armor he wore, which sparkled like a leaf covered in morning dew. It wasn't made from metal but

from the scales of a green dragon. Palpatra's team had successfully hunted the beast. Of course, it hadn't been such a big one, but dragons were beyond what workers and adventurers could usually handle.

Palpatra was an eighty-year-old man.

Most people in this line of work retired in their midforties—the faster ones got out before they even hit forty. The number of adventurers dropped abruptly past age fifty. As expected, people who did this harsh work sidled up next to death couldn't ignore their physical decline.

And actually, although he was an exception, he had still fallen quite far from his peak—during his heyday he was said to have been orichalcum rank. And yet, he remained on the front lines.

Palpatra was so old, but he was still working. Most of the people in the industry respected him.

"That one seems a mite risky, eh?"

Palpatra's wrinkled face grew even more wrinkly as he lowered his voice, and Hekkeran voiced his agreement. "Right? I don't care if he wants to destroy himself, but I'm not interested in going down with him."

"It's true that he's strong, but that sort of overconfidence can spread to fellow travelers. It's extremely dangerous." Gringham emitted a low groan that seemed to say, *What do we do with this guy?* There was probably no worker who *didn't* think that, faced with Elya's attitude.

"Actually, how strong is he? I haven't been to the arena lately…"

"Thou knowest not? I do. And thou, sir?"

“Just stories—I haven’t seen him with my own eyes. If I ask my teammates, they might know something. What’s the standard anyway? If we say Gazef Stronoff is the peak, then where would someone everyone knows, say, the Four, rank?”

“The knights nicknamed Heavy Bomber, Unshakable, Lightning, and Storm Wind? It’s hard to rank them. They’re certainly not as strong as the captain of the Royal Select, but Gazef Stronoff being on top is also in the past. With the passage of time, new powers will emerge.”

“Are you saying Uzruth could be one of those? Is he really that strong? Actually, I’ve never seen the Four up close. Probably the most powerful I’ve seen is the emperor’s direct report, the captain of the Silver Guard. He’s pretty tough—equal to the Four, maybe?”

“The strongest I know are the Council State’s dragonlords. Humans could never defeat them.”

“Some say there are five, but some say seven… Oh, but we’re trying to figure out a yardstick to use to rank Elya, so let’s limit it to human fencers only.”

“In that case, most of the Argland Council State’s fencers get excluded because they’re subhumans. Same can be said for the martial kings of the arena. Then how about the female holy knight of the sacred kingdom Roebel with her divine swords? That said, when it comes to pure fencing ability, I’m not sure…”

As a worker, it was extremely important to gather information about who was strong for carrying out jobs. If someone got in the way, knowing who they were could make the difference between a win and a loss. Of course, a warrior would end up learning about others in the swordsmanship world as a matter of course.

What was happening right now was the same thing. The conversation that had started with the question of how strong Elya

was had gradually gained steam and was turning into an exchange of powerful character info. It resembled a group of kids going, *That guy's strong!*

"The Slane Theocracy's overall level is high, but I don't hear many rumors about exceptional individuals. Even if they have them, they're faith casters, so they don't count."

"One of the top-ranked adventurers in the kingdom is a woman warrior. What about her?"

"Oh, you mean 'pecs, not breasts'? She's strong, yeah. But I heard she lost to the captain of the Royal Select in a formal dual."

"…I heard she nearly killed someone who called her that. Hya-hya-hya! What a terrifying woman!"

"Once you start listing names, it gets hard to keep it to just sword users. The city states have the Brave Warrior and the Dark Knight. The Dragon Kingdom has 'Furious Flash' Celebrate from the adamantite-rank adventurer team Crystal Tear and 'Deep Red' Optix from the worker team Blazing Crimson. In the kingdom…Brain Unglaus?"

The conversation paused for the first time.

"Brain Unglaus? Who's that?"

"Thou have not heard? He's a well-known swordsman in the kingdom… And thou?"

Hekkeran shook his head. He'd never heard that name before.

"Thou knowest not, hmm?" Unable to hide his disappointment, he spoke in an indefinite tone as if digging up old memories. "This happened a long time ago, but I faced him in the quarterfinals of the kingdom's royal tournament. At the time, I was nowhere as strong as he."

“Was that the tournament that Gazef Stronoff won?”

“Indeed. In the end, Unglaus lost to Stronoff, but their dual was worthy of close attention. They were both truly model fencers. I kept thinking things like, *How’d he block that?* and *Oh, in this situation you can curve your blade to strike…* I can only say I was lucky to witness it.”

If a man of Gringham’s caliber was saying that, and Brain held his own against the warrior said to be strongest in any nearby kingdom, then he must be one first-rate fighter.

There are a lot of tough guys in the world I’ve just never heard of…, thought Hekkeran admiringly.

“Hmm. So then who do you personally think is stronger, that Unglaus fellow or Uzruth?”

“Uzruth,” Gringham answered immediately. “Compared to Unglaus at the time of the tournament, definitely Uzruth. I saw him recently at the arena, so I’m confident.”

“In other words, he’s equal to the captain of the Royal Select a few years ago? He’s that strong?! Whoops.” Hekkeran lowered his voice after getting so excited he’d been shouting.

“I see. Unglaus, hmm? I guess I should make sure to keep up to date on the kingdom… Speaking of which, have you heard the big news? About the third adamantite-rank adventurer team?”

“Of course I have, sir.”

“Ah, sorry. I haven’t.”

“Hekkeran…thine ignorance will endanger thy team.”

“I realize that, but I can’t go around gathering info on kingdom adventurers. That’d be a waste of money.”

“Hya-hya-hya. You got some mettle! I like you.”

“Sir, I’d like to get your opinion: I’ve heard the rumors about Momon of Raven Black, but are they not overblown? Did his team truly beat a giant basilisk with only two people? With no one specialized in healing…?”

“Whoa, that can’t be true.”

It would be nearly impossible to kill a giant basilisk with two people. Not even an adamantite-rank team could do it.

“So we agree, Hekkeran? The more information I gather, the more suspicious he appears. There is even one story that says during the incident in the kingdom he slayed a demon over two hundred difficulty in one blow. This is merely my theory, but dost thou think perhaps the kingdom adventurers’ guilds fabricated the stories and promoted him to adamantite in order to increase their own influence?”

“Could be. The appearance of a high-rank adventurer is major. But would the guild really fudge his rank like that? They can be pretty stubborn.”

“Depends on the city. Each guild master is a little different. The head of the guild I had back when I was an adventurer was the nastiest variety. I socked him right in the face! Hya-hya-hya! That’s why I’m a worker now!” Palpatra laughed heartily.

The story of how he became a worker was notorious. There probably weren’t any workers in the imperial capital who didn’t know it. Anyone who went drinking with him heard it over and over.

“Still, I doubt they would do that.”

“So you’re saying those things are true?”

“It’s hard to believe. Even giving them the benefit of the doubt

—although common sense says a difficulty rating over two hundred is already fishy—he wouldn't be able to defeat something so strong in one blow. If anything, maybe the rumor is exaggerated? A high-difficulty demon appeared, a few teams took it on, and the team that dealt the final blow was Raven Black?"

"That's more plausible."

"Anyone stronger than orichalcum rank is crammed into adamantite, so I wouldn't be surprised if there were someone that strong. There has to be a wide range of adamantite abilities."

"So Hekkeran shares my opinion, but thou, sir, deem the stories true?"

"Hya-hya-hya! Well, not *all* of them!"

"So seeing is believing? I'd like to meet him someday…sort of…"

Just as the other two were agreeing with Hekkeran, they heard the sound of flesh being struck and a woman's stifled scream.

The eyes of all the workers present gathered on one point. Several who expected an emergency were already lowering their hips to take a combat-ready stance.

The scream had come from a woman on Elya's team who was now collapsed at his feet. Given the circumstances, no one had any doubt that he'd knocked her down. Looking up at his face twisted in anger, she begged for forgiveness, frightened.

As Hekkeran suppressed the disgust welling up from the pit of his stomach, something flashed across his mind and he turned hurriedly to check on Imina.

Just as he imagined, all emotion had drained from her face. The only thing he sensed was a dangerous energy, as though she

might attack at any moment.

He hurriedly signaled to Roberdyck and Arché next to her that they should intervene.

Personally, he felt the same as Imina, but he couldn't go sticking his nose into other teams' business. Not that it wasn't possible, just that if he were going to do it, he'd have to be ready to take full responsibility for the outcome. Several members of other teams were grimacing in disgust, but for the same reason as him, none of them moved to do anything, either.

Somehow, reason won over. Imina made an obscene gesture at Elya's back and spat on the ground.

"...I guess he's only equal to the captain of the Royal Select when it comes to fencing. It'd be great if he were his equal in humanity, too, but I guess that's too much to hope for. Well, shall we call that good for the small talk?"

"Yes, you're here now, so we have some important things to decide."

"Who will act as overall commander? He's already declined."

A silence fell.

There were four teams total. Certainly, they were an impressive force, but without someone to unify them and give direction, they wouldn't be very well coordinated. It didn't matter how many arms one had; if they couldn't be used at the same time, it was the same as having one.

Managing these teams with their different personalities would be difficult, and doing it without getting complained at would be nearly impossible. Whoever took charge would be hated by the other teams if their orders led to failure or they were suspected of prioritizing their own team's reward.

Frankly, for how much skill it demanded, the job had more cons than pros.

Knowing that, the team leaders remained silent and tried to gauge one another's moods. They seemed to want to push it on the one who brought it up.

After the lull had lasted about a minute, Hekkeran finally said, looking exhausted, "Honestly, we're probably fine without an overall commander, right?"

"Isn't that just putting off the issue? We'll have a problem once a battle begins."

"I propose taking turns. That should get us through this with the least discontent. I think we can confer once more when we arrive at the ruins…"

"Ahh."

"Right."

Hekkeran and Palpatra agreed to Gringham's suggestion.

"Then shall we take turns going in the order we arrived?"

"What should we do about Uzruth's team, Tenbu?"

"That little punk won't care if we skip him. There's no way he's qualified anyway."

"I agree, sir. Then I, from Heavy Masher, shall take the liberty of leading first."

"Thanks, Gringham."

"Counting on you, young'un!"

"Yes, sir. That said, the chance of any savage monsters appear-

ing within the empire is as good as nonexistent. The problems will start once we enter the kingdom, especially as we near the Tove Woodlands."

"Ahh, maybe we should have gone in reverse order!" Hekkeran jokingly cradled his head in his hands, and the other two laughed quietly. Then they immediately tensed up and turned to face a man walking toward the group of workers. Everyone else was already looking his way.

It was finally light out, and the count's butler was approaching across the lawn. His back was straight as he walked—the appropriate posture for one serving a count.

When he arrived before the workers, he bowed. No one responded in kind, but he took no notice and began to speak. "It is time. Thank you very much for taking on the count's request. Two men from the house will accompany you. There will also be a total of six adventurers to guard the wagons and so on. Your destination is an area of unexplored ruins located in the kingdom—what seems to be a tomb. You will stay there to make your survey for three days. Additional compensation will depend on what my master gains from the information you bring him and will therefore be decided at a later date. Are there any questions?"

The butler didn't say very much that was different from the request they'd already heard. The only new information was that there would be adventurers attached as guards.

They were interested in where the tip on the ruins had come from, but every worker knew the difference between questions that would get answered and questions that wouldn't. Anything that was likely to be shared they would have heard already at the request stage.

Besides, if it was a clean job, the count would have used adventurers. The requester was sure to be tight-lipped about a dirty job, and it was safer for everyone not to ask.

"...Very well. I will lead you to the wagons we have prepared."

There were no objections, and everyone followed behind him.

The members of Foresight brought up the rear.

"That piece of shit should die. Whaddaya think? Should we kill him?"

Unable to hold back her hatred for Elya, Imina began spewing it into Hekkeran's ear the moment she was next to him.

Was her voice lowered because she was seething or because she had retained some self-control? He couldn't tell, but he hoped it was the latter.

"I'd heard the rumors, but he truly is a despicable man, isn't it?"

"The worst."

The other two didn't hide their disgust, either.

That was only natural for Foresight. With a woman like Imina as a member, the things Elya did were unforgivable to them.

All the members of Elya's team besides Elya were women—elf women.

If that were all, neither Imina nor her teammates would have taken issue. But there was a reason they unanimously declared him a vile bastard.

Although all the women had the minimum amount of gear, the material and make of it was shabby. That, and the long elven ears that should have been sticking out from under their cropped hair had been sliced off.

They were in that condition because they—all of Elya's team

members—were elf slaves from the Slane Theocracy.

The empire's slavery system had changed a lot under the previous emperor. They had slaves in name, but the slaves' actual status was somewhat different. There were also still some slaves, however, such as the subhumans made to fight in the arena, for whom nothing had changed.

The elf slaves Elya had with him were that kind.

The Baharuth Empire, Re-Estize Kingdom, and Slane Theocracy were made up of nearly 100 percent humans and had a more exclusionary attitude toward nonhuman races than other countries in the area. For that reason, even other humanoids—like Imina, who was a half elf—found them difficult to live in.

The only exception was dwarves. Up in the Azerlisia Mountains that ran along the border between the Baharuth Empire and the Re-Estize Kingdom was a dwarf kingdom. Since the empire traded with them, the dwarf race was a properly protected class.

"I feel bad for the elves, too, but our job right now isn't to save them."

Imina sighed deeply. She knew that logically. Her emotions just couldn't keep up.

"Let's go," Imina replied simply and walked out in front as they increased their speed a little to catch up with the others. Then everyone's eyes popped open in surprise.

The butler had led them to the two rather large covered wagons that were being prepared for the trip to the ruins. A group of people was loading them with supplies. They must have been the adventurers the butler had mentioned. The plates around their necks sparkled gold.

Their surprise wasn't at these people, but at the horses that

would pull the wagons.

"Sleipnirs…"

Voices gasped in astonishment.

Eight-legged sleipnirs were bigger than normal horses, as well as superior in terms of muscular strength, stamina, and mobility, which is why they were considered the best magical beast on land.

Of course, that made them worth a lot—more than five warhorses. It was rare for even nobles to possess them.

But the count had two hitched to each wagon for a total of four. Probably he'd considered the possibility that they could be lost over the course of the adventure, so all the workers could do was applaud his resolution. *Or does he think there is enough treasure in the ruins that we'll need sleipnirs to carry it all back?*

Some of the others must have been thinking the same thing. There were several audible gulps.

"Please use these wagons. Food and other supplies are packed inside. We've also employed some adventurers to guard the wagons and your campsite. Please bear in mind that their contract strictly prohibits them from entering the ruins."

Hekkeran left his friends and jogged over to Gringham, thinking they needed to have a meeting right away.

"'Scuse me, Gringham. There's something I want to talk to you about."

"What is it? Did something happen?"

"It's about how to split up the wagons. Do you think my team could be separate from Tenbu?"

“Huh? Oh. I understand thine anxiety. About her, right? Then my team will go with Tenbu.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“Make no mention of it. For this job, we’re companions. I’m not interested in having any spats before we even begin our survey of the ru—”

“Do you think we’ll be okay with gold-rank adventurers? We’ll have problems if we get back and our base is destroyed or monsters slip past them while we’re sleeping.”

The pair turned in the direction of the loud voice whose sudden comment had been launched like a fireball.

It was Elya shouting in the butler’s direction, but at the sound of his voice—he hadn’t even tried to be discreet—the adventurers stopped loading the supplies as if time had frozen.

When looking up, there were always farther heights, and no way to tell if one would be able to climb to them or not. To people who nevertheless advanced step-by-step, Elya’s comment was utterly offensive. They, too, lived in a struggle for power, so having a job end with their abilities in question—especially by the requester—would impact future jobs. They needed to show off their capability in an indisputable way.

The man who hurled this abuse, considered unforgivable by the workers and adventurers alike, was a person who couldn’t put himself in other people’s shoes—which is why he went on without even noticing how sour the atmosphere had gotten. “No, I understand that they’re fine for carrying luggage. I’m only concerned about whether they can keep danger away or not.”

For crying out loud. Nothing good will come of this tension. I imagine they’ll just take it since this is for work, but still…

It was true that all the worker teams present were probably mythril equivalent; in other words, they were stronger than the adventurers. Still, there were things that were all right to say and things that weren't.

Somebody make him stop, even if you have to hit him.

The workers' eyes were hard as they glanced at one another, and Hekkeran ran over to Imina. She'd be in danger if a sword fight broke out.

But the one who struck wasn't any of the workers. "Sir… Uzruth, correct? We assure you there will be no problems."

"That's assuming we work together, right? If that's the case, then it makes more sense…"

"No, it's because someone even stronger than all of you will also be accompanying you. Momon—"

Responding to the butler's icy voice, a warrior clad in full plate armor poked his helmeted head out of one of the wagons. Up until then, he must have been carrying supplies set on the cargo bed farther in.

"Allow me to introduce you. This is Momon, from the two-person adventurer team Raven Black, an adamantite rank. His teammate Nabe is also here. These two will accompany you and guard your camp. Will that be satisfactory?"

The atmosphere underwent another dramatic change. The highest rank possible for anyone adventuring to attain… With proof of that ultimate strength before their eyes, the workers were rendered speechless.

Mollified by the genuine reactions of the workers to the appearance of the most elite adventurers, the gold ranks returned to loading supplies. The one who seemed like their leader, wearing a

smile that seemed almost deliberate, addressed the raven-black warrior. “We’ll do the rest, so would you go ahead and get to know the workers? We’d like you, as our leader, to have a meeting with them about our security plan.”

“Got it. If your team is fine with that, then I humbly accept your proposal. That said, I think your team should lead the security planning. You have more people. It seems like it would be easier to have you guys do the bulk of it.”

“Humbly?! What are you saying? And we could not possibly disrega—”

“No, I insist that you take point on security. Utilize us well! Nabe.” With a faint chuckle he stepped lightly out of the cargo bed. An astonishingly beautiful woman followed behind him.

Where a gorgeous woman appeared, a fuss was certain to follow. But there existed a level of beauty that didn’t allow for that. Those who saw a truly beautiful woman could only stare.

“Hekkeran, she’s…”

“Yeah, Rober. I was thinking the same thing. We saw her in the northern market. That’s…Momon of Raven Black. And his sole teammate? The rumor that they took out that huge giant basilisk doesn’t seem to be an exaggeration.”

“A giant—is that true?”

“Supposedly. Not only that, but I heard from Gringham that he killed a difficulty two hundred demon in one hit.”

“Surely that’s a lie. Difficulty two hundred is in a realm where it’s impossible for humans to win. Did you mishear one hundred?”

“Even that would be amazing. But somehow it doesn’t seem like a lie when you see how he carries himself.”

Hekkeran felt he'd been able to grasp Momon's personality from the warrior's short exchange with the guy who must have been the gold-rank team's leader. He seemed to have the proper presence and charisma of an adamantite-rank adventurer—Hekkeran thought he could grow to like him.

"Before we get to know one another…there's something I'd like to ask you."

Momon didn't speak very loudly, but they could sense his courage in his deep voice.

"Why are you going to the ruins? I know you got a request. But unlike adventurers, who have a hard time turning down a job if the guild insists, you guys aren't tied to anything, so why did you accept? What motivates you?"

The workers all looked at one another. No one knew who should say it, and it ended up being a member of Palpatra's team who spoke.

"That would be money."

It was a perfect response—because there was no greater reason. The workers hadn't been debating the answer but trying to figure out why Momon, who must have already known something so obvious, would even ask.

Seeing that the other workers were vocalizing their agreement, Momon asked another question. "Does that mean the amount of money offered was worth your lives?"

"Yes. The offer was enough that it made sense to take it. And we can expect additional compensation depending on what we discover in the ruins. I'm fairly certain it's enough to justify risking our lives." It was Gringham who answered.

"I see… So that's your decision. Got it. My apologies for the *ut-*

terly nonsensical question. Do forgive me."

"You don't need to apologize over that… No worries."

"Hya-hya-hya! Seems like that's it for your questions, but can I ask one?"

"Go right ahead, sir."

"I'd like to get confirmation on the rumors. Will you show us the truth of the one that says you're exceptionally powerful?"

"Ah-ha. 'Seeing is believing'? Okay, that's fine. If it will help you be satisfied with our protection, I'll show you my power. But in what way should I display it?"

"I suppose having you spar with someone would be best."

Everyone's eyes gathered on—

"And I said it, so you should fight me."

"What? Sir…I'm terribly sorry, but I'm not very good at holding back. I don't intend to hurt you, and I'm not confident I can be a good sparring partner at your level…but if that's all right, then…?"

"Hya-hya-hya-hya! Well, you are adamantite rank! I'm not even thinking about hurting you."

A faint chuckle came from beneath Momon's helmet. "That's only natural, sir. It's what you call a clear gap in ability. I'm strong. Stronger than any of you. That's why I'm adamantite rank!"

Full of overwhelming pride, he seemed to be peering down at them from high above, but no one was offended. That must have been how much power his presence held. The words he spoke and the terrible authority he exuded, as if he'd racked up more than a

few kills, were very persuasive.

"…Amazing."

"……Yeah, amazing."

Delirious voices commented here and there.

Many women fell for strong men. And many men fell for them as well, in the sense of respect. Like moths fluttering around a flame, people knew that if they got too close they would get burned, but they still couldn't resist. For those who lived in this world of blood and steel, strength was like a massive bonfire.

"Hya-hya-hya! No one doubts that you're adamantite rank! Still, how about we get a taste of what you can do? Here, the wagons are in the way. Can we use that big open space over there, sir?"

Having gotten permission from the count's man, Palpatra led the group over onto the lawn. The workers went with him, of course, but so did the adventurers and the butler.

"I don't think Palpatra can handle him."

"That guy is crazy strong."

"Mm, rather than strong, it's more like he's on another level completely. Doesn't he seem even stronger than both of the empire's adamantite teams?"

"Yeah, you're right. The members of Argenti all have rare classes, so their abilities are uncommon, but in terms of power they lose out to the more basic classes. I hear the Eight Ripples are so great because of their numbers and excellent teamwork."

Argenti was a team whose leader was a bard who'd reached the realm of heroes. All the members had unusual classes. Eight Ripples was a nine-person team. Some people said that each individ-

ual member hadn't reached adamantite rank, that they were only so strong due to their large team size, but others said that by working together they achieved things even other adamantite ranks couldn't.

Still, one had to wonder if either of them were truly worthy of being called adamantite—humanity's last resorts, who made the impossible possible.

Hekkeran could hear his teammates whispering about those things behind him.

And it wasn't just those three. If he concentrated, he could hear all sorts of conversations. The most common topic was speculation about how good a fight Palpatra would be able to put up. Not a single person thought he would beat Momon, because although it had been only a short time, they all considered Momon's aura enough to convince them he was adamantite rank.

As he was walking, lost in thought, someone fell into step beside him. The noisy metal armor was enough for him to know who it was without looking up.

"How do you think their fight will go, Gringham?"

"I pity Palpatra, but Momon is not likely to lose. It's more about how well Palpatra will be able to persevere. Dost thou not wish to reserve the next round?"

"Seriously? Count me out. What about you?"

"I decline. I am satisfied by the display of his superior presence. I do hope however to get some training while we're on the road."

"Me, too—oh!"

The pair looked out at the lawn where Momon and Palpatra were staring each other down at a distance.

The gleam in Palpatra's eyes was not that of an ordinary elderly man but a veteran warrior.

His determination gradually mounted, morphing into excitement; the atmosphere was no longer one of a friendly bout.

Everyone watching was anxious and sticky with cold sweat.

"…This can't be good. Palpatra is taking this seriously!" Gringham inadvertently dropped his forced manner of speaking.

"I get that he's fighting an adamantite-rank adventurer, so he has to go at him like he means to kill him, bu—" Hekkeran, next to Gringham, gasped as he moved his eyes to the dark warrior facing Palpatra.

From Momon, he felt nothing.

In his stance with both arms dangling down, there was none of the fighting spirit one would expect from someone who was about to clash swords. Like an adult facing a child with a sword, his calm was clearly visible.

"Wow, he's amazing! Palpatra's hitting him with that much killing intent and he's not reacting at all. He can't not notice it—he's just at the peak of warriordom. Is that Heights of Nothingness?!"

"Enlightened Mind? Or maybe Realm of the Wandering Priest? He must be awfully sure of himself to look so composed despite the gap between their weapons. Yeah, I'm just amazed."

Palpatra's spear was a magic item with a tip carved from a dragon tooth. Meanwhile, Momon was holding a wooden staff he'd borrowed from one of the adventurers; it didn't look enchanted at all. A magic weapon could have all sorts of effects, like increasing sharpness, boosting the abilities of the one equipping it, or dealing additional damage. At this stage, from a weapon

standpoint, it was possible to say Palpatra had a huge advantage.

"Nah, that can't be true. The gap between them won't be filled by a weapon. And Momon's armor seems more enchanted than Palpatra's. Plus, the items he has equipped are probably more magical, too. Overall, there's either no gear gap, or Momon is ahead."

"Don't be too hasty. Haven't you heard the rumor that the total value of the magic items Palpatra uses surpasses what adamantite-rank adventurers can afford? He's fulfilled tons of requests over the years. He's probably earned the most rewards in the entire empire!"

"Nah, nah, wait a—"

"No, *you* wait!"

As the two of them chattered on, the combatants' will to fight hit critical mass and the battle began.

"Okay, here I come!"

"Come at me, sir, but don't overdo it. This is an important job, r—?"

Without letting him finish, Palpatra charged with elegant power and speed one would never expect from an eighty-year-old man. Meanwhile, Momon didn't even hold up his staff.

"Dragon Tooth Thrust!"

Hekkeran's eyes widened as Palpatra didn't hesitate to use a martial art for his opening move.

He whipped his spear, thrusting to deliver two piercing strikes, like dragon fangs. The attack included a special effect that dealt additional attribute damage. This was a more advanced version of Drill Thrust, which Palpatra had developed over forty

years ago. Known for its good balance, the martial art had been learned by many fighters.

The type of Dragon Tooth Thrust he used was Blue Dragon Tooth Thrust—to deal additional lightning damage.

What's that old man thinking? Sure, you have access to healing magic, but you still wouldn't normally do something like that in a friendly spar!

Even grazing someone clad in metal armor with a lightning-imbued martial art would be extremely effective; the choice showed Palpatra was going all out.

Though the attack should have been troublesome for a warrior wearing metal, Momon nimbly dodged it. Despite his raven-black full plate armor, he moved so lightly it was like he had wings. More surprisingly, he didn't jump out of the way or make any large movement; he evaded it completely while barely moving from where he stood.

No way! I can't imagine what his dynamic visual acuity and physical ability must be!

"Wind Acceleration!" Palpatra used another martial art.

You're overdoing it, you old fart! Did your age hit your brain?

"Dragon Tooth Thrust!" He assaulted Momon again with the same art as before. This time the tip of the spear was imbued with snowy chill—White Dragon Tooth Thrust.

A total of four chained moves in less than the space of a breath.

The spectators were stunned.

Of course they were. Not a single one of the attacks so much as grazed Momon's armor.

Palpatra jumped way back. The beads of sweat on his forehead weren't from exerting his body to attack but from the immense mental pressure of wielding his spear in a battle he couldn't win.

"Wow!"

"He's even stronger than you, Hekkeran."

"Of course he is, Arché. Don't even compare me to him. That's what an elite adventurer is. He's the very top. That's the power of an adamantite rank."

"So is it my turn now?"

Momon held up his staff and pointed its tip at Palpatra's eyes. Meanwhile, the spear Palpatra had been grasping was now leaning against his shoulder. It wasn't a combat stance, but the stance of someone who no longer had any will to fight, of someone who'd given up.

"Magnificent. Stop, stop. Not only can I not win, I can't even scratch you."

"Oh?"

At Palpatra's declaration of surrender, the onlookers sent up an admiring moan: "Whoaaa." Momon was truly overpowering. The gap in strength might as well have been that between an adult and a child—he'd shown them that vividly.

Everyone who had watched began chatting, sharing their impressions, wondering what school of footwork he used to dodge, and so on. Leaving them, Hekkeran and Gringham approached Palpatra, who was wiping the sweat from his forehead and talking with Momon.

“You’re already finished, sir?” His tone and manner had changed abruptly. “…Weren’t you about to get serious there?”

“Hya-hya-hya! What a thing to say to an old man like me. I *was* being serious! That was me being serious, Sir Momon.”

“Oh, er, please excuse me.”

“Oh, please don’t apologize. I’ll feel even worse. And you don’t have to stand on ceremony with me. We should assess each other based on strength, not years lived. It feels quite awkward to be treated with so much respect by someone as overwhelmingly strong as yourself.”

“I see. Then I’ll relax a bit. By the way, stopping here is pretty dissatisfying for me. If there’s a next time, I’ll attack first. Anyhow, I have to load the wagons, so I’ll be going now.”

“Why not let the others load the wagons? That’s not a job for you, is it?”

“No, I disagree. No matter what status you hold, when you’re given a job, you should do it well.”

With that, Momon walked back toward the wagons, and the peerless beauty followed behind him.

The two who arrived just as he was leaving ended up watching him go.

His broad shoulders…

“Hya-hya. You look like you want to ask something.”

“What did you think of him, sir?”

Palpatra’s wrinkled face screwed up. It might have been a bitter smile, but it seemed like something else, as well.

“He’s strong. No, I knew he was strong because he’s adamantite rank. I just had no idea he was *this* strong. The second we faced each other, I had the feeling that no matter where I tried to hit him, he would block it.”

Hekkeran had felt the same thing—that Momon would easily stop and counter all his attacks. Even if things went according to plan, that armor would repel all the attacks anyway—that was all he could imagine. Palpatra, who had faced him directly, must have experienced the feeling more intensely.

“So that’s…adamantite rank…”

“Yep, that’s adamantite. He’s a being in a realm only a handful of people will ever reach. Ah, he really is magnificent—beautiful. That’s a height I’ll never make it to… You must be pretty satisfied having seen it, though?”

“Truly! I have a better understanding of how you both move after watching that match. It would have been impossible to observe so calmly if I had been the one facing him. Apologies, sir, but I really wanted to see Sir Momon attack.”

“Impossible. He didn’t seem very interested in attacking me. He had no desire to fight. Probably it’s as he said, that he’s not good at holding back. He probably thought hitting me would kill me just like that.”

If that were true, some might have found it arrogant. Palpatra, old though he may have been, was a fairly skilled warrior; it could be argued that Momon had underestimated the veteran without even seeing what he could do.

But the reason he could do that was because he was an adamantite-rank adventurer.

“Well, can’t be helped. The gap in our abilities is just that big. It was frustrating at first, but even if he stuck to defense, once he

dodged everything I threw at him, I couldn't really say anything."

They'd been shown the meaning of *strength*.

He had chosen a weapon he wasn't used to, with totally different heft and balance, because he was that confident. The gap between the two men was that big.

Palpatra walked off, mumbling, "I'm beat, so tired." He was headed, of course, for the covered wagons.

As Hekkeran watched him go, he heard a quiet voice.

"I couldn't make it to that realm even in my younger days. So that's adamantite… So high above me…"

Palpatra's shoulders looked so small. In comparison, Momon looked enormous—they could sense his power.

"So that's the most elite rank, adamantite…"

"Yeah, just amazing."

There was no lack of people who agreed with their admiring comments.

2

A single carriage raced like the wind over the cobblestones of imperial capital Arwinthal.

Pulling the resplendent carriage was an eight-legged magical beast known as a sleipnir. Two able-bodied warriors were seated in the box, and on the roof—the cargo bed had been renovated—crouched four people, including a caster and a warrior with a

crossbow, keeping an eye on their surroundings.

Naturally, the reason this rolling defense force, a security detail that was arguably overkill, could go openly down the street was due to the standing of the people inside.

One look at the crest of three crossed staves carved on the side of the carriage was enough for someone with a little education to know whose carriage it was and who was inside. That was why the knights guarding the street didn't challenge them.

Inside the carriage were three men. In their robes, they all looked like casters.

All three were well-known names in the empire's magic world, but their attitudes clearly indicated a hierarchical relationship. The most superior of them had white hair.

Just as Gazef Stronoff was known far and wide as a warrior, there was no caster in the region more famous than this elderly man. He was the great caster, the strongest, most elite in the empire—"Triad Caster" Fluder Paradyne.

Sitting across from him were two of his leading disciples, who were so skilled they had good command of tier-four magic.

Though they'd just left the imperial palace, the atmosphere was ruled by an oppressive silence. One of the disciples cautiously spoke, unable to bear it any longer.

"Master, what do you intend to do about His Imperial Majesty's order?"

Silence reigned over the carriage once more. But it didn't last long. Fluder answered in a voice that was profound in its quiet. "It's His Imperial Majesty's wish. As a retainer, my only choice is to carry it out and investigate. But it's too dangerous to try with magic. We'll start by sifting through the records, then we'll sum-

mon demons to gather intelligence."

"You don't know him, then, master?"

Fluder closed his eyes and waited a few seconds before opening them again. "Alas, I do not. I've never heard of this immensely powerful demon, Jaldabaoth."

The previous month, a horde of demons had attacked the capital of the kingdom. As far as he had been able to gather, Jaldabaoth and the demon maids who attended him were terrifying beings who might as well have been from another dimension.

Due to this demon disturbance, the order of imperial knights who attacked the kingdom every year hadn't marched. Usually invading when one's enemy is exhausted is the proper way to wage war.

But there were two main reasons the empire was invested in this fight.

One was to exhaust the kingdom. While the empire had a standing army, the kingdom's troops were conscripted. For that reason, whenever the empire mobilized soldiers, the kingdom had to mobilize even more—they were at a disadvantage when it came to the quality of individual soldiers. The empire timed their attack for the harvest period to force the kingdom to draft farmers so they would have a shortage of able hands in the fields. The long-term plan was to make the crops go to waste.

The other reason for the campaigns was to chip away at the power of the nobles within the empire. Nobles who opposed the emperor were made to cough up funds via a special war tax. Naturally, if they refused, their families were ruined for suspected treason. In the end, it was only a difference of being tortured slowly or killed swiftly once and for all.

The reason the empire hadn't moved this time was that the

emperor—Jircniv—had judged that since the kingdom had done them the favor of wearing themselves out, it was unnecessary for the empire to do anything. Besides, the empire's nobles in the opposition had already lost most of their teeth.

There was just one problem.

Where was Jaldabaoth, the perpetrator of those truly demonic deeds? And what kind of being was he? Both of those things worried him.

It was only natural that Fluder, the most capable caster in the empire, would be tasked with investigating.

"Then there's the one who routed the demon, Momon of Raven Black, and his companion, Beautiful Princess Nabe. I'm very interested in them. And the mysterious caster Ainz Ooal Gown. Have the retired heroes been stirring? Perhaps a war as fierce as the one with the evil spirits two hundred years ago is about to begin…"

"…Is it?"

"I don't know. But only a fool prepares for war after it breaks out. A wise man makes arrangements in advance."

Soon the carriage reached its destination.

Spacious grounds were enclosed by a thick, high wall with several watchtowers guarding both the interior and exterior. Mixed patrol groups of select knights—of the eight orders of imperial knights, the most elite first order—and casters were making their rounds.

Looking up, the emperor's personal guards mounted on magical beasts, the Imperial Air Guard, and elite casters on watch using flying spells could be seen.

This place was the symbol of the empire's power, the thing

they'd been pouring most of that power into since the previous emperor: the Imperial Ministry of Magic.

The soul of the empire's magic activities—manufacturing the enchanted arms provided to the knights, developing new spells, performing experimental research to improve the standard of living with magic, and so on—could be said to reside here. And the one in charge of it all—although he wasn't minister of magic—was Fluder.

The carriage proceeded across the grounds and eventually stopped before the tower at the farthest reaches of the compound.

They had passed by a variety of differently shaped buildings on their way, and a great many people were bustling in and out of all of them. Only this tower had hardly any visitors. Its security, oddly enough, was incomparably tight.

For starters, the knights guarding this tower looked different. They weren't knights of the first order like the ones who could be seen patrolling the grounds.

Enchanted full plate armor enclosed their bodies head to toe, in their hands they held enchanted shields, and slung on their hips were enchanted weapons. Their crimson capes featuring the imperial crest were also, of course, enchanted.

The magic those items were imbued with wasn't strong, but even the empire couldn't outfit ordinary knights with this much magic gear. More than anything, mere knights wouldn't be assigned to guard one of the empire's critical agencies.

They were the most elite knights and therefore belonged to the emperor's personal Imperial Earth Guard.

The casters next to the knights were just as impressive. They had fought in many battles and honed their combat skills, so they seemed every bit as powerful as the veteran warriors.

The entrance to the building was additionally fortified with four stone golems easily over eight feet tall. They fulfilled their guardian duties with no food, rest, or distraction.

The only people allowed in this place, which was protected as well as the emperor himself, were the more advanced tier-three casters or, in rare cases, research casters with specific errands. Of course, Fluder and the pair of leading disciples were among those with entry permission.

Returning the knights' and casters' deepest bows with a light wave of his hand, Fluder entered the tower. Upon following the hallway leading straight back, he and his disciples came out at the top of a funnel-shaped space. Many casters were working there industriously. The one who seemed to have the highest status hastened over to Fluder, flustered.

"Anything?"

"Nothing, master." The disciple swallowed, and his Adam's apple undulated.

His response was both good and bad news.

Nodding just once with a subtle expression, Fluder turned around to look at him, the deputy head of this place. He was one of the famous Chosen Thirty, the thirty disciples Fluder taught personally.

"I see. So you can't get them to spawn naturally yet?"

"No, we still can't get even skeletons of the lowest tier to appear spontaneously. Now we're experimenting to see if we can get zombies to spawn by placing corpses nearby."

"Hmm, hmm." Fluder stoked his long beard and gazed at the scene below.

There were a little over a dozen skeletons—working fields.

They raised their hoes and plunged them into the dirt. The movements of each skeleton were exactly the same. Looking from the side, they all overlapped—they looked like a single monster.

This scene of utter synchronization, like a group of people doing aerobics together, was the empire's huge, secret project—undead labor.

Undead needed neither food nor sleep, and they never got tired. They were the perfect workers. Certainly they had low intelligence, so they couldn't do anything beyond what they were ordered and nothing too complicated, but that could be solved by giving them detailed instructions from nearby.

The benefits of unleashing undead on farmland with orders to execute were unfathomable. By lowering labor expenses, the price of produce would decrease, farms and fields could be larger, injuries could be prevented—this project was truly dreamlike.

Similar plans using summoned monsters or manufactured golems had been proposed, but undead were the most cost-effective.

Naturally, there was a reason they couldn't execute this perfect-seeming plan on a large scale: opposing forces led mainly by the priests. They were against it on the grounds that giving orders to embodiments of death, the antithesis of life, sullied the soul.

There were other, even more religious reasons, as well. They argued that from a spiritual standpoint, using even the corpses of criminals was desecration because once their punishment had been carried out, their souls were wiped clean. That was problematic.

Perhaps if they had been in the middle of a food shortage and many people were starving to death, the ministry would have had more leverage. As it stood, however, the empire had a great supply of food, and there were no signs of labor issues, either.

And so the priests opposed the project.

The ultimate goal was stronger soldiers. If the empire relied on undead to meet production capacity, they could use their human resources for other things and possibly discover powerful knights.

There were also concerns that human workers would be laid off if undead labor became the norm; worries about whether undead would really obey humans forever; fears that with countless undead around, the balance between life and death would collapse and stronger undead would spawn spontaneously—but these were things not only priests but anyone who heard about the plan would think.

This facility existed to verify each concern and solve the problems.

"You haven't discovered the fundamental cause?"

"No, my apologies, master."

Why did undead spawn naturally? Their pursuit of the answer had major implications for the future.

The Katze Plain was known as a cursed land, covered by a mist that only cleared during the war between the kingdom and the empire. The spawn rate there was so high that skeletal dragons, one of the most powerful undead, capable of neutralizing all magic spells, could appear.

Even if the empire eventually conquered E-Rantel and its environs, they didn't want an expanse of land where undead were constantly popping into existence in their territory. Knowing the process by which undead spawned would surely be useful for governing the area. Perhaps they could stop them from spawning ever again.

"I see. Understood."

The deputy bowed, relieved there was no rebuke, and Fluder set off, walking around the outside of the funnel-shaped room.

By the time he reached the door on the opposite side, the number of leading disciples behind him had grown.

The knight guarding the door pushed it open for them, and the party continued inside. It was another hallway similar to the previous, but this one was completely empty—not a person to be seen. The air smelled dusty, and the light seemed to be in a losing battle with the darkness.

Proceeding straight down the eerie corridor, they came upon a spiral staircase extending below.

They passed through several doors on their way, but their clacking footsteps didn't echo for very long. They went perhaps five floors down, but the air seemed much heavier than that.

It wasn't simply because they were underground. This much was clear from the hard expression born of anxiety worn by everyone in the party, including Fluder.

Their faces were grim as they reached the deepest floor, a large open space. The atmosphere was so tense they were practically bracing themselves for combat.

Everyone's sharp eyes were gathered on the single thick door. This door, so imposing it seemed to be a division between worlds, was fitted with layer upon layer of physical and magic defense so it wouldn't break or open easily. It was a door that would not permit escape.

The doors they had passed through on their way here also hinted at the danger lurking in the depths. They'd been built as barriers so that if the threat behind this thick door made a move they could seal it away or at least buy time.

Fluder spoke in a hard voice to warn his disciples. “Don’t let your guard down.” His words were brief and to the point, which was what made them terrifying.

The casters accompanying him all bowed low. Fluder gave the same warning every time they came here. Still, knowing what was beyond the door, they couldn’t crack a smile.

Across this threshold was the ultimate undead. There was no doubt that if it was released, an unprecedented disaster would befall the imperial capital.

Several of the disciples began casting protective magic—not only pure physical defense spells but also mental protection. After an appropriate amount of preparation time, Fluder eyed each of his disciples’ faces to make sure they were ready.

With a nod, he spoke the words that unsealed the room’s entrance.

As the magic took effect, the heavy door slowly groaned open.

Darkness made it difficult to see inside the room, but something like a chill radiated out of it, and a couple of the disciples shivered. Even with magic items to protect them from environmental effects, the sheer hatred of the living that emanated from inside was enough to make their blood run cold.

An audible gulp resounded throughout the hall.

“Let’s go.”

At Fluder’s signal, magic light created by the disciples chased the darkness from the room. The banished gloom seemed to gather at the edges of the light and grow even deeper—that’s what it felt like.

With Fluder in the lead, the party entered the room where the presence of death hung in the air.

It wasn't a very large room, so the light shone to the back almost immediately.

Against the far wall was a giant pillar that stretched up to the ceiling. Shaped almost like a gravestone, it drew the eyes. But something else drew them even more strongly: the thing immobilized and crucified to it.

The undead's whole body was bound in chains far thicker than a human thumb, so it was completely restrained. The ends of the chains were secured to the cobblestone floor. Not only that, but huge iron balls were attached to the undead's hands and feet.

Nothing would have been able to move under those conditions. The incredibly thorough restraints showed how wary the casters were of this opponent. It was why even after seeing those fat chains, some of the members of the party had lingering concerns—thoughts like, *Couldn't it easily break through those chains and escape?*

It looked like a knight clad head to toe in black armor, but it definitely wasn't human.

The first thing one noticed was the being's hulking physique. It was well over six feet tall.

The next was that black full plate armor. It had a pattern like blood vessels running over it and sharp spikes jutting out here and there like embodiments of violence. Its helmet had horns like a demon and an open face that left its rotting features visible. In its vacant eye sockets, its hatred for living things and anticipation of slaughter burned red.

It wasn't alive but dead. If it weren't, the amount of malice toward living things it was emanating would have been impossible.

"The death…knight…"

One disciple who had come to this place for the first time murmured the legendary undead's name. It was an undead so legendary few had even heard of it.

The red glow in the death knight's eyes appeared to blink and move to size up the casters. No, they couldn't know how its gaze was shifting just from the flickers of light. But their shivers told them they were being watched.

The casters accompanying Fluder were a handful of capable ones who could use at least tier-three magic. But even they couldn't stop their teeth from chattering.

Even with the mental protection magic, the fear that welled up inside them couldn't be stopped. Still, the magic was probably the only reason they were able to stand there and bear it instead of running away.

"Steel your hearts. The weak will perish," Fluder warned them and approached the death knight.

In response, the undead tried to stamp its feet as it seethed with murderous intent.

The chains gave an ear-piercing screech, but the monster's body barely moved at all.

Fluder thrust a hand toward it.

His incantation rang out in the magically illuminated room. It was an original spell of his own creation, an improvement on Summon Sixth-Tier Undead.

"Obey me!"

The spell finished casting, and Fluder's voice melted away.

But the death knight's eyes still contained a hatred for the living. Everyone could see the magic had failed.

“So I still can’t control it?” There was audible frustration in his voice; it’d been five years, and he still couldn’t dominate this undead.

The monster had been discovered in a region famous for frequently spawning undead, the Katze Plain.

The company of imperial knights who encountered it were not familiar with the monster type, but they had their orders, so they initiated combat as usual. It was ten seconds later that they realized they’d been both hasty and foolish; the imperial knights, known for their great strength, were awash with fear and despair.

The battle was overwhelmingly one-sided—their opponent was too strong.

Many knights had been mowed down before they finally judged that they had no way to deal with the monster and called for a retreat.

Of course, they couldn’t just leave a monster like that out there. Especially after seeing the fallen knights turned into undead, it was clear that giving their opponent time would lead to serious damage.

Following a clamorous debate among top imperial executives, they decided to play their trump card as their first move: They would mobilize the strongest power in the empire—Fluder and his disciples.

And as is evident from the fact that the death knight was restrained in this basement, the battle ended with Fluder and company’s victory. But the only reason they could win was that the death knight couldn’t fly. They carpet-bombed it, shooting Fireball over and over until its movements slowed, and eventually Fluder, who was attracted by its overwhelming power, was able to capture it.

With it tied up here, he was trying every method that had worked to control normal undead—all sorts of spells and magic items—to conquer it.

"It's too bad… If I could control his monster, I would be the greatest caster, surpassing even…"

One of the Thirteen Heroes, tamer of the dead Ligritte Belzú Kaurau—he would far exceed her.

Really, Fluder didn't yearn for power so much. His true wish was to peer further into the abyss of magic. This was just one part of that process.

His disciples didn't know that. That's why their attempts to comfort him missed their mark.

"Master, I think you've already surpassed her."

"Absolutely. The Thirteen Heroes are in the past, master. They can't compete with you where you are on the frontier of contemporary magic."

"I think you've already surpassed the Thirteen Heroes, as well, but if you could control the death knight, you'd be the greatest power in all the empire."

"They say an individual can't win against a mob, but that is only true when the individual is weak. This death knight is the strongest individual…"

No one could see Fluder's little wry smile, because he was standing at the head of the group. All they could see was the hatred in the eyes of the death knight.

"But if even you can't control it, master… How strong could this death knight be?"

"Hmm…I don't know. Theoretically, I should be able to. So I

must be lacking something. Does anyone have any ideas?"

His query was met with silence.

It was possible to control undead using magic. One of the Thirteen Heroes had done it. With Fluder's ability, he could dominate fairly upper-tier undead. Maybe he would even be able to control the one before them as well.

But that was simplistic thinking; magically controlling undead was more complex. Domination and destruction of undead was fundamentally the realm of priests, who borrowed the power of the gods. Fluder was trying to shoehorn magic in as a substitute for divine power, so it was no wonder there were all sorts of discrepancies.

"I don't mean to insult you, master, but…"

One of his disciples spoke up hesitantly, and Fluder gestured for him to continue.

"Perhaps you aren't powerful enough? For instance, if there were a seventh tier of magic, maybe it could be summoned from that realm?"

"That is certainly a good point."

"I heard that adventurers give monsters numerical difficulty ratings. What if you thought of it along those lines?"

"I heard that those numbers are really rough and pretty pointless once you figure in age and physique," another disciple chimed in.

"But even though it doesn't work for unknown monsters, there's no easier way to conceptualize difficulty, is there? The numbers are based on adventurers' battle impressions and a wide range of other data, so they can't be completely off the mark."

“Then don’t you think it would be useless for the stuff of legends like a death knight?”

“That reminds me, master. There’s that mysterious volume full of information about monsters. It’s not in there?”

“No, it’s not.” Fluder stroked his beard. “There might be a complete version in Elyuentiu, but the only one circulating is incomplete.”

Puzzled, one of the disciples turned to the one next to him and asked a question. He spoke softly, but the room was a knot of silence. It sounded much louder than it was. “What in the world is Elyuentiu?”

“The name of a city!”

“I know that. It just seems like a weird name.”

“Yeah… I looked it up once. Apparently, it means ‘tree at the center of the world’ in the language that was spoken in those parts in ancient times.”

Fluder struck the floor with his staff as a warning to the two disciples who had started chatting without permission. They were in the dangerous presence of a legendary undead—they couldn’t let their guard down here.

They heeded the warning immediately, and silence ruled the room once more. The only sound was the death knight’s chains straining as he tried to break them.

“It’s unfortunate, but I have nothing left to do here—at least for today. Let’s go.”

“Yes, master.”

Several voices containing a hint of relief answered, and Fluder left the death knight’s presence.

Even the mighty Fluder couldn't keep his footsteps the same speed going in and coming out. With that gaze pounding his back, his footsteps quickened in spite of himself. Of course, that went for his disciples as well.

As Fluder walked through the darkness, he recalled his disciples' earlier conversation.

Elyuentiu…

The capital of the country the Eight Kings of Avarice had built and the only of its cities still standing. It was also the city defended by the Thirty City Guardians equipped with incomparably powerful magic armor.

If the magic items left behind by the Eight Kings of Avarice are really still there, thought Fluder, *I could probably use them to advance my skills*. They were fantastic magic items no one could acquire; the only ones permitted to carry any of them were the Thirteen Heroes.

A dark flame flickered in Fluder's heart.

The Thirteen Heroes. Heroes of old. Even though he should have been powerful enough to stand among them, they were permitted, yet he was not. In what way was he inferior?

Hoping to put out the flame sputtering within him, he summoned comforting thoughts. The position he held, the things he'd built… They weren't inferior to the Thirteen Heroes' accomplishments. On the contrary, his position among the empire's casters surely put him ahead of them.

But once lit, the black fire—envy—wouldn't be extinguished so easily. He wasn't jealous of strength, wit, or ability; he envied the pioneers who got the chance to peer into the abyss of magic.

Fluder was an elite caster. Everyone acknowledged that, and

probably the only ones who could be considered his equals were the Thirteen Heroes. But he couldn't give orders to the death knight, and he could only use up to tier six of the supposed (data was not terribly reliable) ten tiers of magic. Those realities rubbed the truth in his face—that he was still far from the abyss.

He was getting on in years.

As he was a psychic caster, one of the trees of supernatural secrets he mastered was forbidden curses. Because it was forbidden magic, it couldn't be used, but use it Fluder did, and he stopped his aging. Of course, considering the tiers he had mastered, the spell was too difficult for him. He'd forced it to cast by fusing it with a ritual.

Because he had tried to make the impossible possible, there were clear distortions in the power; if he had cast it perfectly, he wouldn't age at all, but Fluder still felt the effects of time in a lesser way.

For now, things were working out. But the distortions were growing, and eventually the spell would fail.

Yes, Fluder would die before peering into the abyss of magic.

If he'd had a highly skilled mentor, he might have reached this point much sooner. But no one had come before him—he was forced to blaze his own trail.

He took a casual look over his disciples, the ones who were coming down his trail.

This fueled the flame of his envy, and it grew.

He was more skilled than anyone present, but how old had he been when he reached the level his disciples were at now? He didn't even need to think about the answer. He had definitely been older. What a difference between having a predecessor and

not.

Why have I no master?

Fluder tried to crush his usual thoughts with others.

It's fine. My name will go down in history as a pioneer. All the great casters who come after me will owe their success to me. My disciples are my treasures. And if one of them surpasses me, their power will be mine as well.

As Fluder consoled himself, he turned his thoughts to a specific disciple, although she wasn't with him anymore. *I wonder what tier she could have reached…*

"Arché Eeb Rile Furt…"

She was an outstanding girl. She'd mastered tier two at such a young age and had already begun tier three. If she had kept going at that pace, she probably would have reached Fluder's level eventually, but for some reason, she had needed to quit…

At the time he thought she was so foolish and felt only disappointment.

"That was a mistake."

Maybe he'd let a big one get away.

Where is she now? He almost wanted to try to find her.

If she could use up to tier three, he could probably promise her a decent position.

But he had things he needed to do.

Fluder recited the words to open the heavy door.

Like the disciples surrounding him, once he'd stepped outside,

he breathed in and out a few times. The atmosphere in the room, filled with the death knight's imposing presence, was heavy. Even though they'd been breathing, it didn't quite feel like the air had been reaching their lungs.

"Master!" A deep, thick voice called out to him. It was one of his leading disciples, who was also a well-known adventurer. Because of his experience, he was made a deputy director of facility security matters.

"What happened? Is it an emergency?"

"No, not an emergency. Some adamantite adventurers are here requesting an audience with you."

Fluder gave the man a dubious look.

He hadn't made any appointments. As the top caster in the empire, Fluder had a lot of work to do. Adding to that the time he set aside for his personal magic research, and he had no free time. He couldn't just nod his head yes because someone said they wanted to see him. The only person in the empire he would see without an appointment was the emperor.

But dismissing them outright would be too hasty. Adamantite-rank adventurers were heroes; despite being individual actors, they couldn't be ignored—not even by the great caster Fluder. He couldn't treat them coldly when he might need to request them to procure rare items for him.

"Is it Argenti? Or the Eight Ripples?" He named the two adamantite-rank adventurer teams from the empire.

But the disciples shook his head. "No, it's a two-person team called Raven Black. They presented their plates as proof."

"What?!"

Raven Black was the newly famous kingdom team. Although

they were only two, they'd achieved hero-level results. Most recently, they'd single-handedly repelled Jaldabaoth, who had been rampaging through the royal capital.

Why do they want to see me? Several doubts surfaced, but his desire to discuss magic with the high-level caster Beautiful Princess Nabe overruled them. He immediately did away with his doubts.

Then he remembered, in his capacity as the emperor's retainer, that his master, Jircniv, wanted to see him. *I guess I can do that after the meeting*, thought Fluder as he gave orders to his disciple. "Show them in. I'll be there as soon as I'm ready."

3

"Wow, I'm flabbergasted there are actually ruins here. I thought the story seemed fishy when I heard what kind of compensation they were offering, but there are actually unexplored ruins right in the middle of this field. Aren't you surprised?"

Hekkeran's teammates were next to him looking at the ruins, and they all expressed their agreement.

The ruins were a tomb, but it was located in a basin, sort of sunken, almost like an upper level had caved in.

One of the reasons the tomb was unexplored was probably that as far as the eye could see was grass—there were no remains of old cities to attract adventurer attention. Besides that, the area was dotted with other swells of land, so there was no way anyone would realize that beneath one of them lay ruins.

The roof of the central building stuck out slightly, but even

that they wouldn't have noticed without climbing up this far.

The theory the brains of each team had come up with was that the earth and rock surrounding the ruins had eroded and exposed part of the wall, leading to the discovery.

"It *is* a surprise. Or more like, I'm so excited. If the ruins really are unexplored, there's a fairly good chance some amazing items are just waiting in there untouched."

"I wonder. Well, we're out in here in the middle of nowhere, but there haven't been any issues at all. There probably aren't any dangerous monsters here. The most worrying thing now is how our requester was able to specify where we should pitch camp."

Their base camp was on an open area of grassland in an ideal location.

No one would be able to see them from a distance, because the surrounding hills blocked all lines of sight. If they were careful with lights, it would be very difficult to spot them.

That was precisely what made it so alarming.

"Really, though, how did the count know about this spot?"

The most likely explanation was that he had been looking for somewhere in the area to pitch a base camp for some reason. If that were the case, a lot of things made sense.

But it also caused new questions to spring up. Why would he, an imperial noble, need to build a base camp in this out-of-the-way place—in the kingdom's territory, at that?

"I heard there's a big underworld organization in the kingdom. Pretty sure they're called the Eight Fingers. Apparently, they're up to a whole bunch of horribleness."

"I heard they're even smuggling things into the empire. A thief

I know was grumbling that they're so powerful in the kingdom that if anyone tries to investigate them, it blows up in their face," Imina commented after Arché while smoothing her hair, which was blowing around in the wind.

Roberdyck sounded bothered. "I've heard talk of narcotics as well. Drugs are wonderful if used effectively, but when people make them into products that prey on the weak, I can only feel disgust." He couldn't help it that his voice rose slightly.

"Okay, we're done speculating about baseless rumors and chatting about things that don't have to do with the job at hand. Besides, when Arché looked him up, she said he didn't seem like the type who would do something likely to get himself purged, right?"

Hekkeran reminded everyone of that, ignoring Arché's murmured protests of "I didn't have enough sources. He could have been sneaky and concealed things."

"Well, I think you all know this, but—"

"Of course we do. We shouldn't talk about it in front of the other teams. Some workers might even take smuggling jobs from the Eight Fingers. As long as some of the other teams might have connections to them, we're not gonna say a thing. Not until the job is over."

"Yeah, we have no idea what a filthy, tear-stained reward this might be."

"Even if the money's dirty, a reward's a reward, and we can live on it," snapped Arché.

Roberdyck shot a glance at her and took a deep breath as if to cool down his overheating insides.

"Sorry, that was rude."

“No, I nearly spoke rather impertinently myself. Please forgive me.”

“Never mind that. You didn’t even say anything. But I would like you to remember that that’s what I think. I’m after material wealth more than spiritual. That said”—Arché raised a hand to signify that she was still talking—“I want to avoid anything that could be a disadvantage to my teammates. I’ve seen my share of people destroyed by greed.”

“We believe in you, Arché.”

Arché nodded, and no one said anything else back. Their feelings were conveyed without words. Their past arguments had cultivated trust.

“So? What do you think? There’s a good chance something is ruling this tomb…” Hekkeran was examining the well-pruned undergrowth. The statues of angels and goddesses here and there were extraordinarily beautiful, and it was clear at a glance that they, too, were given regular care.

On the other hand, the branches of the huge trees towering around the graveyard were all drooping and bent, giving the place an atmosphere like gloom itself. The gravestones weren’t in straight lines and looked more like a witch’s uneven teeth. They combined with the more neatly kept parts of the area to create severe discord.

Someone is taking care of the graveyard. They just aren’t sane. Hekkeran arrived at this thought through gut instinct, and it made him cold.

He turned his attention to the huge building to shake off his chills. The grounds of the graveyard contained a mausoleum in each cardinal direction, plus a gigantic, magnificent one standing in the center. Eight fairly large warrior statues surrounded the large mausoleum, and their imposing presence made it feel as

though they would turn away all calamity and fools who dared approach.

"The undergrowth is trimmed so neatly. There's not even any moss. Someone pretty particular is taking care of this place. I wonder what kind of person…"

The teams present—minus Tenbu—had felt something strange was up from the moment they learned the nature of the request was a survey.

Then they arrived, and the area was rolling plains as far as the eye could see. It was the most unsuitable place for a tomb.

For starters, it was strange to build a tomb of this grandeur in such a remote place if anyone actually planned to use it. The location was too inconvenient.

It was somewhat understandable if it was meant as a monument to convey the achievements of the deceased to future generations rather than a place to deify the dead. It was possible the tomb had been built at the site of some great deed as well.

But in that case, it was strange that there was no historical evidence of that immortal achievement. With no clues emerging even after all the teams pooled their information, there was a good chance that it had been wiped from history.

It didn't make sense. The alien feeling that something was stuck in his throat caused Hekkeran to furrow his brow.

"This could end up being a huge incident, depending on who is in here. What'll we do about that?"

"I'd hate if it was some innocent person's house…"

"The members of each team in charge of gathering knowledge discussed this, but the guild didn't have any information about ruins in this area, and since it's so far from the nearest village, the

chance that a normal person is living here is really slim. That leaves either some kind of illegal squatter who can't be out in the open or a monster. Since there aren't any tracks outside the tomb, either it's someone who doesn't need food or water or the inside is made in a way that someone who lives here can sustain themselves. But we don't have enough information. Speculating any further will just lead to stereotyping and narrowed thinking. So that's why we're going in."

Information about ruins flowed from the Adventurers Guild to the government. The discoverer retained the right to first survey for a set amount of time. If neither the state nor the guild had information about some ruins, killing an illegal squatter would be overlooked.

In other words, a "when in doubt, kill" policy.

Maybe it was a violent way to do things, but humans were weak in this world. They couldn't have some unknown building a nest right next door.

Actually, twenty years earlier, great harm had come by way of the organization Zurrenorn, which performed horrifying experiments while occupying some ruins. As people did nothing because they didn't have enough information, an entire—albeit small—city was destroyed.

The guild had created their policy so that nothing like that would ever happen again.

"Well, if it fits the usual pattern, it'll be undead. If the tomb is occupied by undead, we need to mop them up and bless the place to get rid of the negative energy, right?"

"As you know, yes, it's very important that we do that. If you leave undead alone, there is a chance stronger undead will spawn. That's why you often find powerful undead inside ruins."

“It’d be nice if it was just an abandoned tomb and all that was in it were golems whose master had ordered them to keep the place tidy. That would be so much less trouble… What’s our strategy?”

“I think you should have gone to the meeting instead of me, Hekkeran.”

“Don’t worry about it. None of the other team leaders were there, right? Everyone fulfills the role they’re best suited for.”

Arché sighed conspicuously in response to Hekkeran’s wink.

“Once night falls, all teams will begin operations. We’re going to invade from all four directions and meet at the huge mausoleum in the middle.”

“I see. It’d be easy to spot us in daylight.”

“Yeah.”

The area was open, and they couldn’t see any lookouts or travelers. It should have been fine to invade right then, but there was no telling what might happen. It would be a little safer to make their move in the dark.

Also, if they continued observing the ruins, even only until night, it was possible they might learn something. This job had a time limit, but the brains of the teams had concluded that it wouldn’t be a waste to spend some of it observing.

Really, they probably wanted to observe for a few days.

“Wouldn’t we be able to scout safely if we used Invisibility?”

“We did consider that, but given the chance something goes wrong, we figured it would be better to go in all at once. We’ll still be able to investigate at least a little bit.”

Invisibility wasn't a perfect spell; there were plenty of ways to see through it. If someone or something—who knew what was in there—guarding the ruins discovered a worker approaching with magic, the security level would increase as a matter of course. If they had bad luck, it was possible they wouldn't make it into the tomb at all.

The plan must be to all move at once to avoid heightened security. Having understood that, Hekkeran nodded. It had some holes, but it managed to balance danger and duty to the minimum acceptable level.

"So we're on a break for now?"

"Yeah. Raven Black and Screaming Whip are on guard, but just in case, and to stay sharp for later, each team will take turns keeping an eye on things. The lineup is the order in which we reached the count's house, and we'll switch every two hours."

"I see. So we're last, then?"

"Yeah. We still have a while to go."

With those words, she rotated her neck and scrunched her shoulders up and down.

"You seem tired."

Arché nodded at Roberdyck. "I am. It took so long because that horrible guy proposed we storm the place. It was so hard to convince him we shouldn't. The word *cooperation* is not in his dictionary."

"Oh…the fencing genius?"

"You mean 'piece of shit bastard,'" Imina sneered, full of killing intent.

Hekkeran smiled awkwardly in response and made an effort to change the subject. “So how about we go back to camp and take it easy until it’s our turn?”

“I approve of that idea. I don’t think it will rain anytime soon, but we’d be sorry if we didn’t take precautions. Miss Imina, that means we need you, so please don’t keep that scary face on forever.”

“Aye-aye. Agh, that guy pisses me off so much I just want to stab him to death. We’re definitely pitching our tent nowhere near them.”

“I have no problems with that as long as we’re inside the planned campground.”

Really, it was problematic, but he wasn’t interested in pitching in their vicinity and then ending up in a fight.

The four of them turned their backs to the ruins and set off walking.

“The more you think about it, the more mysterious it gets. And it makes sense that a count would make this request.”

When Hekkeran turned around, Arché had stopped and was staring at the ruins.

“You can’t read anything about the era or background of these ruins by looking at them. It’s like they just appeared here out of nowhere, that’s how alien they seem. I feel like those statues somewhat resemble the statues of this region from before the evil spirits rampaged, but that one over there seems to be way more like something from the east. And considering the cross grave markers… Nope, I give up. I have no idea.”

Listening to Arché expound, Hekkeran held back a grin; he could barely contain his excitement.

“In other words, it means we could find some pretty neat stuff in there?”

“Without a doubt. I’m sure there will be some surprises.”

“…But remember, everyone, the chance we encounter terrifying undead is also high.”

“Ahh, that’s scary!”

“You’re so bad at this, Hekkeran. That didn’t sound like me one bit. Actually, thanks to your forced imitation of my voice, I’m creeped out for real.”

“Ah, sorry.”

“Even so…I am kind of looking forward to this.”

“Yeah. What is this tomb for? Who’s buried here? It’s the kind of stuff that really piques my intellectual curiosity.”

“Right. It is kinda exciting to experience the unknown.”

“Know what else is exciting? Money! I hope there’s a pile of it.”

Seeing the ear-to-ear smiles on his teammates’ faces, Hekkeran felt satisfied. They’d all gotten their hands dirty for one reason—money—or another, but not because they wanted to. Really, they preferred the type of jobs that adventurers did.

He didn’t know if Arché would be able to go adventuring once she took on the task of raising her sisters. If she left, it would take some time to find a new member, and even once they found one, it would take more time for them to get used to working together, during which they would have to take lower-level jobs.

Maybe this job was the perfect final adventure for this group with these members.

From now on…more jobs like adventurers would take. Or… maybe it wouldn't be bad to go in search of the unknown…

Hekkeran looked up at the sky. It seemed to go on forever.

•

Once dusk had begun to envelop the world, the workers all came out of their well-camouflaged, low-to-the-ground tents. It was time for them, engaged in clandestine jobs such as they were, to go to work.

The adventurers had begun preparing dinner.

They set fire to white solid fire starter and lit the charcoal, but the light was concealed using Darkness. Darkness could only cancel light, not hide the flames. With the flames blazing in the dark, they boiled water from a Bottomless Waterskin.

They poured the boiled water into wooden bowls. The portable food inside lost its shape before their eyes and began giving off the pleasant smell of soup. That plus crusty bread was their communal meal.

Anything else was each person's preference.

The bowls contained the yellowish soup workers loved for its emphasis on nutrition and shelf life. Some people added shavings of jerky, some tossed in thinly sliced bits of meat, some sprinkled seasonings, while others just filled their stomachs with it as it was.

Everyone finished up after eating a single bowl. Considering the strenuous work they were about to do, it was definitely not enough food, but eating anything too heavy wouldn't be good for performance. Still, it would be dangerous to eat nothing at all; they weren't sure when they would be able to have their next meal.

It wasn't as if they had infinite emergency rations of portable food sticks, and carrying too much would slow them down. They needed to make a good compromise.

After handing their empty bowls to the adventurers, the workers picked up the bags they'd been packing.

The adventurers saw the workers off, and all the teams began operations. The adventurers would guard the camp, not participate in the raid.

First the workers went around the hill to encircle the ruins. If they were attacked on the stairs, they were to send a signal into the sky.

Many of them were wearing full plate armor, so one would think that between the noise and their sluggish movements, a covert operation would be impossible, but that's because common sense only goes so far. To those who used magic to defeat common sense, it wasn't impossible at all.

By first casting Silence to eradicate all sound within range, the creaks of their armor and their footfalls as they raced across the ground became inaudible.

Next, Invisibility. Using this spell made it extremely difficult for someone with regular vision to detect them.

To be extra careful, rangers observed from the sky using Invisibility, Fly, and Hawk Eye. In order to deal with any incident as it arose, they had arrows enchanted with Paralysis at the ready.

With this double-tiered formation, the parties reached their destinations.

Now it was go time.

They climbed the hill and then descended a few yards to the ruins.

Each team would search the ground level along their way and meet at the central mausoleum. To the extent possible, they needed to accomplish this while their Invisibility spells were still in effect.

They also needed to align their pace so that part of the group didn't rush on ahead of the others, but it was difficult to pinpoint everyone's locations at night, especially when they were all see-through.

Luckily, they'd planned for that.

Suddenly, strange rods around a foot long appeared on the ground. Then they floated into the air as if the invisible humans had picked them up. When they bent, they began to glow.

These special rods—Fluorescent Sticks—gave off light via an alchemical reaction that occurred when the rods were bent and two special liquids inside mixed together.

The reason the workers had temporarily dropped them was that Invisibility spells affected everything one was carrying. In order to make them visible, they needed to be briefly separated from the items in their inventory.

The lights moved side to side a few times, and then the rods were destroyed, as if they had performed their function. When the shining alchemical mixture was poured onto the ground, all trace of it disappeared as it hit the dirt.

This was confirmation that all the worker teams were ready to go.

Though the teams were spaced out and couldn't see one another, four ropes were lowered to the surface level of the Great Tomb of Nazarick almost simultaneously. They were climbing ropes with knots at perfect intervals.

The ends of the ropes were attached to pitons driven into the ground, and they swung from them, creaking.

If someone with the ability to see the invisible had been present, they would have witnessed the figures climbing down the ropes.

Even workers like Arché who built up their magic skills and knowledge more than their bodies, who hadn't acquired skills that required nimble movements, could manage this level of exertion. That is to say, worker or adventurer, it didn't matter—this level of physical ability was required.

Their daily training and the knots in the rope served them well, and all the workers reached the graveyard without falling.

Each team had one of the four smaller mausoleums as their first objective.

Their Invisibility spells wore off, and everyone appeared. Each team went sprinting toward their assigned mausoleum.

They ran in a crouch through the gloomy graveyard, attempting to conceal themselves with gravestones, trees, and the statues. The Silence spells were still in effect, so they didn't make a sound. Even the warriors in full plate armor did their utmost to stay behind cover as they ran. Their brilliant maneuvers made them like shadows running across the earth.

•

As the leader of Heavy Masher, Gringham, approached his team's mausoleum, his eyes widened slightly.

It was an even more splendid building than he'd expected.

The mausoleums in each cardinal direction were only small in comparison to the huge central one. Up close, it was clear they were breathtakingly large and solemn.

Its white walls were smooth, as if a planer had been run over them, and although it must have been some time since it was built, there were no blemishes from the elements, and no chips or cracks, either.

At the top of a three-step marble stoop was a thick door. The door was well polished, not a spot of rust to be found. The black steel fairly gleamed.

The amount of care that went into maintaining this building was clear.

In other words, there definitely has to be someone here, Gringham concluded as his thief teammate advanced to carefully inspect the stairs.

They were communicating via hand signals, since Silence was still active, and Gringham was told to stay back. He slowly retreated to avoid being caught in any area-of-effect trap there might have been.

The thief was doing a painstakingly thorough investigation. Gringham was getting a little impatient, but that couldn't be helped.

A person's soul resided in their flesh, and when that flesh began to rot and fall off, they would be called to be with the gods. Thus, the dead went straight to the graveyard—and were generally interred in the earth—but the cases of some nobles and other privileged people were slightly different.

If corpses were buried immediately, checking whether they had really decomposed or not required digging them back up. So in order to get visible proof that the corpses had rotted, they were left out to rest for a time. But no one wanted a corpse lying around in their house.

So the graveyard's mausoleum would be chosen as the venue

for the resting. Once the corpse began to rot, a priest witness would judge that the person's soul had no doubt been called to be with the gods.

The mausoleum's common use space was generally for this purpose. The spacious room would have a number of rock slabs, and the corpses would be placed there to rest. The sight of a number of partially rotted corpses seems terrible, but in this world, it was completely natural.

Still, when it came to the very wealthy and influential, such as great nobles, things were different again. Instead of a common use space, they would be laid out in their family mausoleum. The mausoleums powerful people owned became seen as symbols of their power, since they would wait there for the gods' call.

It was not uncommon in the least for the buildings to be furnished and decorated with treasures. In other words, for a grave robber, a wealthy person's mausoleum was the same as a vault full of riches. For that reason, the buildings were often fitted with dangerous traps to keep raiders away.

Hence, the extra precautions in investigating this tomb—it was so luxurious.

Just as the thief had finished inspecting the stairs and was about to move on to the door, the sounds in the area suddenly returned.

Their Silence spells had worn off. Well, it was good timing for it. The thief noiselessly approached the door and resumed his close examination. Finally, he placed something like a cup against the door to listen for any noises on the other side.

After a few seconds, he shook his head a few times at the others.

That meant, *Nothing there.*

The thief himself cocked his head a couple times in doubt.

It was strange that the door wasn't even locked, but if there was nothing left for him to discover, then the rest was up to the vanguard.

When Gringham stepped forward, the thief, having oiled the door, put his hand to it. Right behind the thief was a warrior with a shield.

Gringham abruptly gave the door a shove, and it slowly cracked open. Whether thanks to the thief's oil or the methodical care of whoever was looking after this place, the door fell away fairly smoothly for its weight.

The warrior standing by next to Gringham moved between him and the entrance to defend against any sudden ambush or trap.

But the door opened all the way up without spewing any arrows or other projectiles, and a gaping darkness appeared before Heavy Masher.

"Continual Light."

An arcane caster's staff glowed with magical light. It was possible to control the level of brightness to some extent, so the caster brought the mausoleum's interior into view. With another cast of the spell, the warrior's weapon also began to shine.

Illuminated by the two lights, the place could have been mistaken for a room in a noble or even royal mansion.

In the center was a white stone coffin that could have doubled as the altar in a shrine. It was over eight feet long and covered in carvings that were elaborate without being gaudy. In each of the room's four corners stood a white statue clad in armor and outfitted with a sword and shield.

And then—

"Hmm. Does anyone know what that crest might be?"

"Nope, no idea."

A flag with a crest embroidered on it in gold thread that Gringham had never seen before hung on the wall. If a caster and thief who had memorized most noble family crests (even those from other countries) didn't recognize it, he figured the conclusion was valid that it wasn't a kingdom noble's crest.

"Maybe it's the crest of a noble from before the kingdom was established?"

"Thou believest it's from over two hundred years ago?"

Many countries had been destroyed by the evil spirits two hundred years ago, and in fact there were quite a few countries in the area that had a history of more than that. The kingdom, the sacred kingdom, the council state, and the empire had all been established in the past two hundred years.

"If that were the case, what would that have to be made out of to survive so beautifully after all these years with nary a blemish?"

"It's probably protected with preservation magic, don't you think? Or maybe there's a spell that repairs it."

"But, leader, how about you knock off that weird way of talking? We're the only ones here, you know."

"Hmm…" Gringham's eyebrows bent to a dangerous angle, but then he broke into a smile. "Agh, I'm bone-tired! All this *thee* and *thou* hogwash. What kinda lunkhead talks like that!"

"Nice work, but like he said, when it's just us, we really don't mind if you talk normal."

“Nah, I shouldn’t. Talkin’ all formal-like makes you sound like a worker people can rely on. You know it’s my policy to talk that way for work ’cause it’s a pain to switch gears!”

Gringham responded to his teammates’ wry smiles with one of his own.

He was the third son of a farmer in the kingdom.

Everyone knows that splitting up land among heirs forever is foolish because the shares get smaller and smaller to the point where barely anything can be harvested, and the family’s power withers. That’s why the eldest son inherits the estate. The second son has the option to stay on to assist, but the third son is just in the way. For that reason, it wasn’t rare for third sons to head to the city to earn a living.

Gringham had been blessed with both physical ability and friends, so he was able to make a success of himself, but because he’d been born a peasant—and the backup of the backup to maintain the household at that—he’d received zero education. He couldn’t read or write, and he didn’t know anything about manners or etiquette.

Certainly what was prioritized in workers wasn’t education but perfection in request fulfillment, but for the leader of a team, that alone obviously wouldn’t cut it.

He’d studied desperately but didn’t have as much aptitude in that realm as with physical ability, so he’d ended up in a fairly shabby state. The only reason no one had usurped his position as leader was that his teammates all valued him for everything besides his education level. He’d started in with the strange way of talking in order to not embarrass them.

He wanted requesters to think, *This guy talks funny because it makes his team stand out.*

He probably still got teased for it, but that was better than having someone think, *Well, he's just a not terribly bright farmer who became a team leader, so we can't expect much more than this.*

"Very well, break time is over! In we go, men!"

No one had any objections to Gringham's declaration, so they began to move.

First, the thief went inside to make a careful search.

The remaining members jammed some thick iron rods in the door so that even if some trigger was tripped it wouldn't shut on them. Then they closed it more than halfway so the light wouldn't leak outside. While the thief performed his careful examination of the interior, Gringham and the others kept a vigilant watch outside. They'd had no choice but to use light, so someone might have seen them.

Gringham was on his belly keeping an eye on their surroundings when the thief inside, having reached the flag, was taking a focused look at its bottom edge. Finally, he held out a hand, as though he'd steeled his resolve, and touched it, then withdrew in a hurry.

"Okay, no problems that I can see. You guys can come in." Watching Gringham and the others enter over his shoulder, he pointed up at the flag. "This'll probably fetch a good price. It's woven with precious metal threads."

"Whaaaat?! Precious metal?! Who would hang something like that up in a place like this?!"

The entire party gasped in shock. Then they all hurried to the flag and took turns touching it. The coolness they felt really was metal.

From the way it sparkled, the thief's assessment was probably correct. Estimating the weight from its size and then adding the artistic value would make it worth quite a lot.

"This is a win for the requester. Though we can't say he's recuperated the cost of hiring us—no, all four teams—there must be a pile of treasure just waiting for us here."

"Should we take it right now?"

Gringham answered the thief's question. "This will be rather unwieldy. And probably heavy, as well. Let's recover it later. Any objections?"

"No. It would definitely be hard to do our job if we were carrying this. Regarding the results of my inspection: no traps and no hidden doors."

"…Very well. I'm counting on thee." Gringham turned to the arcane caster—a wizard—who cast a spell as if taking the cue.

"Detect Magic… Can't sense any magic tricks. Of course, that doesn't count anything they might be hiding with stealth magic."

"…Then I guess there's nothing left to investigate. Shall we head to the main building?"

Everyone's eyes gathered on the sarcophagus in the middle of the room.

The thief took his time giving it a thorough once-over before announcing there were no traps.

Gringham and the warrior nodded at each other and began sliding the stone cover off. It was fairly large, so they figured it would be heavy, but it was far lighter than expected, to the point where when they put some muscle into it they nearly lost their balance.

Once the lid was off, light reflected from inside—innumerable brilliant sparkles.

Gold, silver, gems of various colors, all kinds of accessories giving off countless polished gleams. Over a hundred gold coins were scattered in between.

The flag had given Gringham a hunch, but this sight made him grin from ear to ear in spite of himself. The thief, after making careful observations, reached inside and pulled out one of the myriad sparkles—a golden necklace.

And it was a gorgeous piece. It looked like a simple gold necklace, but the chain was ornamented with minute carvings.

“A hundred gold would be a cheap estimate… Depending on where you took it, you could get a hundred and fifty.”

Everyone reacted differently to the thief’s appraisal. One person whistled, another smirked. The one thing they all had in common was the flames of delight and greed dancing in their eyes.

“We get half, so at the very least this is fifty additional gold pieces. Ten per person? That’s a marvelous bonus.”

“This…these ruins might be a mountain of treasure.”

“Wow. This is ridiculously amazing.”

“It really is. But what a waste to put all this treasure out here. I’ll find a good use for it.” At that, the wizard plucked a ring set with a huge ruby out of the pile and kissed the jewel.

“It’s ginormous!”

The priest scooped some of the gold coins into his hands and let them spill back out.

The bright clinking of coin on coin echoed throughout the

room.

“I’ve never seen gold pieces like this before. I wonder what era, what country they’re from…?”

The thief put a scratch in one using a knife and smiled in admiration. “These are quality coins. They’re double the weight of the trade currency, and if you consider them works of art, you might be able to even get a little more.”

“This is…heh…heh-heh-heh.”

A couple more members joined in as if they couldn’t hold back the laughter. Even their share of this alone was no joke.

“Men, let us save our prayers for afterward. Let us recover these items as quickly as possible and head to the main building! If we’re late, our share will decrease!”

“All right!” A spirited response to Gringham’s call rang out. It was full of excitement and enthusiasm.

4

The huge warrior statues, so lifelike they seemed liable to move at any moment, guarded the large mausoleum in the center of the ruins like knights protecting their king. Hekkeran, at one of their feet, was watching one of the four smaller mausoleums.

After a little while, he caught sight of five figures rushing out of it like the wind. He confirmed to a neurotic degree that nothing seemed off as they sprinted, trying to stay out of sight, and that there was no one in the area watching them. A few seconds later, seeing there were no issues as they approached, he let out a small

sigh of relief.

He stepped out from the shadow of the huge statue and gave the sign. Gringham, running at the head of the line, caught it immediately and jogged over to him.

“Gringham, took you long enough.”

“My apologies. We seem to have kept you waiting.”

“It’s not as if we decided on a meeting time, so it’s no problem. More importantly, let’s get out of here and decide what to do next.”

Hekkeran ducked down and began leading them while keeping an eye on their surroundings.

As soon as they had started walking, Gringham asked, “I must know. Didst thy team discover any riches?”

Hearing his voice full of excitement he couldn’t quite contain, Hekkeran remembered his own team a few minutes before and grinned. “Quite a bit! We’re thrilled. And the old man said the same thing.”

“Thy team as well, then? Coming here was the right decision.”

“Sure was. We’ll have to thank the great man buried here.”

“Indeed. Still, after discovering so much, we must be prepared for the possibility that the main building contains nothing.”

“Oh, I bet there’s more.”

“Well, then… How much would you wager?”

“Now you’re talking. We’ll find more treasure in the tomb *and* I’ll win some off you! Awesome. The only problem is that it seems like we’ll both bet in the same direction…”

The pair didn't say anything, but the corners of their mouths curled up sharply.

"Without a doubt. I have a question for thee, however. What is that?"

Gringham was eyeing something that could have been called a stone monument standing at the base of one of the huge statues' feet.

"That?"

Hekkeran filled him in on the results of the investigation without stopping, explaining how no one from the other three teams who had already arrived knew what the writing said. Everyone had sort of been hoping someone on Gringham's team would know.

"It looks like a stone monument, and it's got some kind of writing carved in it."

"What dost thou mean by 'some kind of writing'? That's awfully vague."

"We don't know what language it is. It's not the kingdom's language or the empire's. And apparently, it's not one of the ancient languages from this area, either. It might not even be human. The only thing we can make out is the number two-point-zero."

"A number? Common sense says that would be the year this place was built, but it's too low."

"Arché was saying maybe it's the key to the riddle of these ruins, but…well, maybe we should remember it for later just in case."

"Hmm, yes. Let's."

They passed by the statues and went up a long, shallowly in-

clined, white stone staircase, and the entrance to the central mausoleum loomed before their eyes.

"Smells of dead people."

"Yeah, sure does. I've smelled this many times in the fog on the Katze Plain," Hekkeran agreed with Gringham's murmur.

What hung in the air mingling with the cold wasn't the putrefying kind of stench that triggered nausea but a smell peculiar to graveyards—and undead.

The tomb may have been tidy, but there were definitely undead inside.

The party was ready, and when they entered, they found themselves in an open hall. To each side were too many slabs of rock to count, and on the opposite side was a staircase leading down. The door at the bottom was wide open. The air coming from inside was terribly frigid.

"This way."

With Hekkeran acting as their guide, Gringham and his team began descending the stairs.

At the bottom, straight in front of them, was a door to a burial chamber. There didn't appear to be any other doors.

And there were all the others—Hekkeran's team, Foresight; Elya's team, Tenbu; and Palpatra's team were all gathered in a space smaller than the mausoleum but still plenty spacious at the top of the stairs.

"Okay, what should we do now? The plan was to split up and gather info on the interior, but does anyone have any other ideas after exploring the smaller mausoleums?" After Hekkeran spoke, he surveyed the group.

It didn't seem like anyone had come up with any new proposals. Was it ambition or just the light making their eyes glitter? He didn't know, but they sparkled for certain. The excitement on their faces said they were ready to dive right into this tomb.

"Then I have an idea. My team will check around the outside to search for hidden doors."

The members looked put out despite the fact that it was their leader who had spoken.

They'd seen such a pile of riches! Who could agree with that idea, even if he was a veteran? They were probably visualizing the treasure escaping their grasp.

"How about it? We may have investigated the ground level, but we didn't do a thorough job. Maybe there's another way in hidden beneath the mausoleum. And shouldn't we examine the graveyard?"

"He's right. I once heard a bard sing of the vast Sasacharre ruins, which had a quick, safe route to the center hidden near the main entrance."

"Yeah, Gringham. We already examined this room and unfortunately there aren't any secret doors here."

"So, rather than taking a loss, I'd like you to split anything you guys find on this level with us. Hmm. Maybe ten percent from each team? And then if you find a lower level, will you give us first dibs tomorrow?"

"I have no objections to that proposal."

Gringham was the first to reply. Hekkeran agreed a beat later.

"Okay, then, no one seems to have any objections. But what about you, Uzruth?"

“Personally, I take issue with it, but if it’s only ten percent, then it’s fine.”

The old man smiled naively in response to Elya’s half-sarcastic remark. Elya made a sour face upon his attitude being evaded so simply.

“Oh, sir, in that case, I’d like to ask you a favor. There was a flag woven out of precious metal thread in the mausoleum we searched, but it was so unwieldy that we didn’t bring it back with us. Could we have you go and recover it?”

“My team is in a similar predicament to Hekkeran’s. Sorry to make extra work for thee, but we would much appreciate if you recovered ours as well.”

“Then take our stuff, too.” Elya jerked his chin at a slender elf, and she stumbled as she put down the huge sack she was carrying.

“Got it. Is there anything else you want to leave or have us grab?” No one replied to Palpatra’s question. “Okay! Then as I proposed, we’ll search the ground level. Do be careful in the tomb. If you see anything with monetary value, feel free to leave it for us.”

“Ha-ha. Monsters we’ll leave, but unfortunately for you, sir, we’ll be taking every last bit of treasure.”

Some of the workers chuckled and Hekkeran said, “Okay, then, shall we go?”

Everyone accepted his suggestion immediately, and so they took a step forward. Eyes bright with anticipation and greed, they took a step into the unknown ruins, this subterranean tomb.

Hekkeran opened the door at the end of the room, and a hallway extended farther in. By this time they were expecting it, but

this hallway had been kept clean as well.

There wasn't a speck of mold or moss on the stone pathway, and in the walls on either side were double levels of hollows containing things the size of human bodies wrapped in shrouds. It didn't have that corpse stench, but there was some kind of smell —the chill in the air or perhaps an atmospheric hint that someone had died.

Every so often pale light shone from the ceiling, but there were definitely gaps, so darkness remained here and there. Hekkeran didn't have any trouble walking, but it was dark enough that he worried they might overlook something. He felt like he should have brought a light.

"Rober, is that body registering as an undead?"

"No."

Arché responded, "Oh yeah?" and turned toward a body, took out a dagger, and sliced open the shroud. Seeing that, two others left the main party to inspect the body with her.

"...Judging from height and build, there's an extremely good chance this is human—adult male."

"No clothes, so we still can't tell what era these ruins are from, huh?"

"These ruins really are a mystery. The style of architecture doesn't indicate a time period, and neither does the burial method. They could even be from over six hundred years ago."

"If they were, it'd be a historic find."

Among informed experts, it would be a point of debate, but these people were there to work.

Flustered upon realizing Hekkeran and Gringham were star-

ing at them coldly, Arché hurried to give the results of their inspection. “We still don’t know which era these ruins were built in or what their story is.”

“Understood. Can we move on? I want to get to the monster killing.”

Going along with disapproving Elya, the party proceeded down the hall, but only a couple of steps later they stopped again.

They tensed into battle stances holding the weapons they had already drawn.

From somewhere up ahead, they could hear the sound of numerous bones clacking.

Glimpses of the undead running down the hall flashed in the ceiling lights.

As the distance closed and the identity of their opponents became clear, the workers couldn’t believe their eyes, and a shock rippled through them.

“This is just ridiculous…”

“Whoa, are you serious…?”

“Huh? Skeletons? Really?”

As soon as someone said the name of the monsters, the laughter they couldn’t hold back filled the hallway.

“C’mon. Skeletons? Look how many of us there are!”

Skeleton-type monsters didn’t look all that different from one another, so it could be difficult to tell what type one was facing at a glance.

But from their presence, it was easy to assert that these were

plain old skeletons.

"If someone were sending out scouts to test our strength, they probably would have sent something stronger… I got it! There isn't actually any monster ruling these ruins. Either that or it's one so incompetent it can't even estimate our fighting power. Or it could be a half-wit who hasn't even figured out there's a raid happening."

They couldn't stop laughing.

"Ah, but I just can't believe it's skeletons. Maybe all the treasure was in the mausoleums up on the ground level."

"That would be the worst."

For workers equivalent to mythril-rank adventurers, skeletons were incredibly weak. And whose idea had it been to send fewer skeletons than the amount of workers?

Facing the six skeletons standing in their way, they exchanged glances that said, *Who's going to take 'em?*

"Not it." Elya was the one to clearly assert himself. Everyone understood how he felt.

"Then I shall lead."

Gringham stepped to the front in a single smooth motion.

What were the skeletons, with their barely existent intelligence, thinking? Did they imagine the warrior who stepped forward had been shoved out of formation? Or was it something else?

They attacked all at once; however—

The ax and shield clobbered them.

It only took a few seconds. No, even less than that.

Gringham smashed the skeletons, stomped on their remains, and let out a tired-sounding sigh. It was due not to exhaustion from combat but to the utterly pathetic fact that his first battle in these huge untouched ruins that he was so happy, as a worker, to have the chance to explore was against skeletons, the lowest tier of undead.

"How fragile. It seems they really were just skeletons. But it wouldn't be wise to let our guard down. Let us proceed cautiously, keeping in mind the possibility that stronger undead could appear."

Everyone pursed their lips and proceeded farther into the ruins, heads filled with fantasies of the mountain of treasure that surely awaited them.

•

"Sheesh. They've gone."

"Yes, they have. They may be workers, but we all shared a meal, and they're our teammates on this job. I hope they make it back safely… What do you think, Momon?"

"They're probably all going to die."

Ainz answered in a low voice, and the adventurer team leader who'd asked the question was taken aback.

Crap, I just said what I thought.

"N-no, I mean, they should all be prepared to. These are untouched ruins. Who knows what kind of danger awaits? Wishful thinking will only get them hurt."

"I see… Thanks for your…concern."

That seemed pretty forced…but I guess he's taking it at face value? Works for me…

The leader must have been nodding because he had blindly taken the adamantite-rank adventurer's words in a positive light. Ainz's work—being friendly with him during the whole trip to Nazarick to get him to show goodwill—had paid off.

"Well then, I think I'll take the first rest, as we planned."

Ainz walked toward his tent—which he naturally shared with Narberal. He knew some of the humans suspected their tent was at a distance from the others so no one would be able to overhear any rough, heavy breathing. Or rather, the leader of the other team had told him as much.

The man seemed to want to get closer to fellow adventurer Momon more than the workers and had been passing information he'd gotten from them to Ainz.

Ainz entered the tent with Narberal, shut the opening, and took a look outside just to be safe. No one was paying attention to them. On the contrary, it seemed like they were purposely avoiding looking in their direction.

"I was right to not outright deny that our tent was a love nest. Now no one thinks it's weird that we pitched it at a distance, and no one will approach or pay too much attention to us."

Instead of losing anything by doing that, they had actually gained a lot.

Ainz took off his helmet and revealed his skull face.

"Okay, Nabe—er, Narberal. I'm returning to Nazarick. The plan is to send Pandora's Actor in my place, but until then, if anything happens, find a way to handle it."

“Understood, Lord Ainz.”

“Right. Then contact me immediately in an emergency.”

Ainz canceled the magic that had created his armor and swords. The weight of the helmet in his hand disappeared at the same time.

The restricting sensations that had been enveloping his body thus removed, he sighed in relief, even though he wasn’t tired. It was probably the same for the way he rotated his shoulders even though there was no way for them to get stiff—these things had to be vestiges of his humanity.

“Phew.”

The remnants of human emotion were a bother at times.

If he had been able to handle everything in a calm and collected manner, things might have turned out differently. But if he didn’t have vestiges of his human self, would he still have been so attached to the Great Tomb of Nazarick? He probably would have lost the feelings he had toward Satoru Suzuki’s memories, as well as the memories he’d made with his friends.

Ainz smiled bitterly and cast a spell. The thoughts of his human vestiges could no longer be found in even the smallest corner of his mind. Ainz wasn’t the outstanding sort of person who could do two or three things at a time. Now he had to discard any unnecessary thoughts.

The spell he cast was Greater Teleportation.

Thanks to a ring he was wearing, he was able to get through the barriers inside the Great Tomb of Nazarick, and he instantly arrived outside the Throne Room.

“Welcome back, Lord Ainz.”

He was immediately greeted by a woman's beautiful voice celebrating his return.

"Thank you, Albedo."

After straightening up from her deep bow, a smile that reminded him of a riot of blooming flowers appeared on her peerlessly beautiful face as she stared at Ainz, as if she could see nothing else.

Urk…

When he noticed the tender light in her sparkling golden eyes, he nearly wriggled in discomfort. But that would have been unbecoming of the ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, Ainz Ooal Gown, so he held it in.

In order to suppress the low-intensity and thus lingering emotions, he conspicuously cleared his throat, though his bony body didn't require it.

"The raiders should be here soon, according to plan. Actually, they might be here already. How is the welcome party prep coming along?"

"Swimmingly, my lord. Our guests are sure to have an enjoyable time."

"I see… Albedo, I'm looking forward to seeing your style of hospitality."

He stepped into the heart of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, the Throne Room. Albedo followed after him a moment later.

He'd given her one order with regards to the raiders. He wanted to examine how her idea of a defense system fared in a real battle.

His old guildmates were the ones who had thought about

which monsters should spawn where and stationed them accordingly. There was nothing wrong with that. But now that Nazarick's situation had changed, he couldn't say for sure that there wasn't a better way to position them.

Thus, an overhaul of the defense system was critical. Now, they were going to test it.

"The raiders are weak. We won't be able to test everything. Still I'm hoping there will be something we can gain from this."

"Understood. I guarantee we will perform up to your expectations, Lord Ainz."

"Good. As we agreed, I've cut down the amount of cost-incurring traps, like the one where we send undead charging into poison gas. Make do with traps that use auto-spawning minions. No issues with that, right?"

Albedo smiled in response, and Ainz nodded.

"Okay. Then I'll have some fun in here for a while. By the way, what are the other floor guardians up to?"

"I gave orders to gather the moment you returned. Shall I let them in as they arrive?"

"I'll allow it. The more the merrier."

Ainz leisurely took a seat in the throne, and a number of monitors just like television screens floated before him. They all showed scenes of what was happening inside Nazarick, things Albedo wanted to show him as she controlled the displays.

Most likely, they showed parts of the defense network that Albedo had adjusted, but he didn't really know what was different from before.

In order for this to be a fruitful exercise, I have to get some-

thing out of watching this, too. Otherwise I'll be in a pinch if we're all sharing our opinions afterward.

Ainz was the absolute ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick. He couldn't very well tell his subordinates he knew nothing about its defense network.

"And just to make sure, there's no chance of Ariadne activating, right?" he asked, even though he had the console open and had confirmed, flipping through the tabs, that there were no issues.

"I don't believe so. There is one thing I wanted to ask. If the raiders built a blockade, would it end up activating?"

Ainz remembered a *Yggdrasil* Q and A he'd seen a long time before. Or had it been patch notes from the developers?

"It shouldn't… Yeah, I don't……think so."

That's how it would have been in *Yggdrasil*, but there was no guarantee those rules would hold in this world. Actually, he wasn't even sure if there was any Ariadne in this world.

"What about manipulating the humans to activate it on purpose?"

"There's a chance it wouldn't work, but considering what we'd lose by it activating, I don't think it's an experiment we'd want to perform."

The Ariadne System…

It was the evaluation mechanism of *Yggdrasil*'s base-building system.

There was an easy way to build an impregnable fortress: Blockade the entrance and make it so no one could invade. The

Great Tomb of Nazarick would have been pretty much perfect if they had buried it completely underground. But from a gameplay perspective, that couldn't be allowed.

The Ariadne System existed to keep guilds from building bases that couldn't be raided.

There had to be a route from the entrance to the heart of the dungeon. Other things Ariadne checked included distance walked inside and number of doors; there was a wide array of specifications.

If a dungeon that didn't follow the rules was uploaded to *Yggdrasil*, the guild would be penalized and its resources would sharply decrease.

In the case of Nazarick, they were able to maintain such a vast dungeon because they had solved all those issues on levels five and six, not to mention put in tons of real cash.

The workers appeared on one of the monitors Ainz was controlling.

"Tch! Okay, they're finally in. They kept me waiting long enough."

Ainz was filled with disgust as he watched the video of them tramping with their dirty feet into the sanctuary he'd built with his friends. If his emotions became too unbalanced, they would stabilize immediately, but this smoldering sort of irritation couldn't be completely suppressed.

"Albedo. Don't let a single one of them out of here alive."

"Of course not, my lord. Please enjoy witnessing the fate of these thieves who dare trespass on your most sacred home. Oh… but who will you use as the guinea pigs for your sword experiment, the ones you requested?"

“Ahh, right. I sparred with the old man for a round. This guy I fenced with a bit on the way here. That team won’t be good for practicing. So, by process of elimination…they’ll be good.” Ainz pointed at the monitor, turning it so Albedo could see.



Chapter 3 The Great Tomb

CHAPTER 3
The Great Tomb

1

The workers led by “Green Leaf” Palpatra parted with the other excited, expectant teams and looked out from the top of the stairs near the entrance to the central mausoleum.

Nothing moved in the graveyard, sleepy like death. There were only silence, darkness, and starlight. When Palpatra took a step down, one of his teammates spoke.

“Isn’t this kind of a waste, sir? Don’t you think one of the other teams could have searched the graveyard?”

“Of course they could have. There’s not a huge gap in ability between the teams, minus that piece of shit one. Heavy Masher and Foresight could probably do anything we can.” Palpatra interrupted his teammate’s “So then—” and continued, “We got first dibs on tomorrow’s search, right? It’s not a total loss. Besides, we may finish searching the ground level by tomorrow, so the last team might end up guarding base camp with no gains at all.”

“I see…”

“It’s too risky to be the first ones to raid unknown ruins anyhow. They’re our canaries. Hope they make it back safely.”

Palpatra turned around with a cold glint in his eyes. He was watching the workers who had charged in, though they were no longer visible.

The slightly disparaging expression didn’t match his usual friendly old man vibe, but his teammates knew him well, so they weren’t surprised.

Palpatra was an extremely prudent person. He layered precautions on precautions and was the type to look before leaping. That was how he had been able to continue adventuring for so long and how he managed to defeat a dragon. He was so cautious, in fact, that he occasionally missed out on profitable opportunities. Still, he had never lost a man; his ability was worthy of the faith his teammates put in him.

There was nothing more valuable than life, not to any of them, but they still regretted losing the riches they felt had slipped through their fingers.

"It might have been a chance to discover some amazing item! It might have been worth betting our lives."

"You might be right. But take a look at this well-kept graveyard. If someone is keeping this place tidy, there will definitely be monsters to greet us. It's better to have the others investigate what types of monsters there are, don't you think? Personally, I don't much care for this type of request. Too many uncertainties."

One of his teammates replied to these grumbles with a flippant "But in the end, you took it!"

"Yes. Because I figured if there were other teams, we could escape while they end up victims."

The party reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Is that why you took on the search of the ground level? So if we hear them scream, we can run away?"

"That's one reason. I'm making a bet… As you said earlier, we stand to lose a lot. It should be safer once we have more information, but it's unclear how many benefits there really are. If it doesn't work out, allow me to apologize."

"Don't worry about it, sir. We trust you no matter what. You

tend to make the right choice."

"And if we do miss out here, we'll just gnash our teeth and make a killing on the next job. Aren't you the one who said that as long as you're alive, you'll always have another chance to profit, so you shouldn't go recklessly rushing into danger?"

"Ahh, that takes me back. We were young then."

"You're still young!"

"Well, when you say it, sir…"

The party was all wry smiles as they set off across the graveyard toward one of the smaller mausoleums.

"Actually, I'm sorry I made a decision on my own when I should have conferred with the rest of you first."

"Well, there wasn't much you could have done, given the timing. Plus, we chose you as our leader. If our trusted leader decides something, we're happy to obey."

"…You seem disappointed, though. What are those bitter smiles for? Well, anyhow. Let's get down to business here. If we have time left after the search, maybe we can get Momon to give us some training. It's a good opportunity, so you fellows should try sparring with him, too."

"Yeah, his match with you is burned into our brains. He really is an adamantite rank."

"There are all different levels within adamantite rank. Frankly, the empire's Eight Ripples aren't really adamantite caliber. Momon is a true adamantite rank on a level above the one I couldn't even reach."

"Sir…"

“Hya-hya-hya! No worries. In my heyday, I might have been jealous, but now I’m just a wrinkly old man. It’s not a shock to me. And I’ve seen my share of true adamantites, but Momon is outstanding. His presence feels like the true of the true.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. That’s why you really should have him go at you, even just casually. If you’re going to keep adventuring even after I die, it’s an experience you’ll treasure.”

“There’s no way you’re going to die, sir. I can’t even imagine you retiring.”

“Yeah! I think you’ll live as long as Paradyne.”

“Hya-hya-hya! Nah, that’s impossible for me. He’s something else.”

“What a wonderful team you are.”

Suddenly, the quiet voice of a woman.

In this group, there were two women on Hekkeran’s team, Foresight, and three elf slaves on Elya’s team, Tenbu, but the voice was none of those.

The party raised their weapons and whirled around.

At the top of the gently sloping stairs they had just descended, at the entrance to the mausoleum, stood women in maid uniforms—five of them.

They were all unbelievably beautiful, which made them seem very out of place.

The strange thing was that although they wore maid uniforms, the outfits were unlike any Palpatra had ever seen before and had a metallic gleam, like armor.

“Who…are you? I’ve never seen you before… Hmm… So there was a secret passage after all?”

“Girls? They’re as pretty as Raven Black’s Beautiful Princess, but…they must be more than looks, huh?”

“They don’t seem hostile. Maybe they were hired by someone else…? Nah, that can’t be…”

“What should we do, sir?”

Palpatra’s teammates, watching the maids’ every move, looked to him for direction.

Negotiating would have been best, but there was no way things would resolve amicably.

“Numberwise, we’re even… Maybe it’ll be okay?”

Their opponents were as strong or perhaps slightly stronger than they were.

The fact that they hadn’t attacked while all the workers were together meant they probably didn’t have a trap or the might to take everyone at once. Likewise, since they came straight at Palpatra’s team and talked to them now, they were probably confident they could beat them.

As Palpatra had gotten older, his body didn’t perspire like it used to, but at this moment, the hands clenching his spear were clammy.

“Still, maids in a graveyard? This guy’s taste is suspect.”

The team went from chatty to pale and trembling in the space of a moment, foreheads slick with sweat.

Palpatra was assailed, for just a split second, by the feeling that the temperature had plunged, but the goose bumps covering

his entire body were not his imagination.

Even by the light of the moon, he could see the cutthroat looks in the eyes of the maids lined up above them.

"LET'S KILL THEMMM."

"...We should."

"Normally we wouldn't kill them, but put them through incredible amounts of pain, no?"

The maids were awash with killing intent. Their emotional agitation was so intense that it seemed to warp space.

"Okay, okay." The one who seemed to have the highest status clapped her hands lightly. "We were ordered not to let anyone out alive, so killing them was already decided, but I'm glad you're all in the mood."

A metallic *clack* rang out loudly on the marble steps. It was made by the greave-like high heels the maids were wearing.

Palpatra and his team backed up as if they'd been pushed.

Judging from the fact that their opponents carried no weapons, they had to be casters. In that case, it was a bad plan to let them have the higher, more advantageous ground and set this open area with a clear line of fire as the battlefield.

For Palpatra and his team, closing the distance would be effective. The maids would have the advantage in the opposite scenario, so why were they coming down the stairs? Would they float into the sky with Fly in a pinch?

Bewildered by the stately approach of the maids, whose faces were as expressionless as Noh masks, Palpatra and his team conferred behind their shields about what to do, what strategy to use.

Clack! The sound was louder now. The maids had stopped midway down the stairs.

"First, allow me to introduce myself. I…ahem…I am the deputy leader of the Pleïades, Yuri Alpha. We'll only be with one another a short while, but I hope you'll remember me. Now then, this would be over much more quickly if we could clean you up ourselves, but due to certain circumstances, we are unable to lay a hand on you directly. It's unfortunate, but that's how it is."

Adorable voices laughing, like bells ringing, traveled on the wind until they reached the workers.

The smiles of these peerless beauties were so charming it wouldn't have been strange for one of them to fall in love at first sight.

Palpatra had seen a lot of things in all his years as first an adventurer, then a worker. That included the inhuman beauty of monsters. Even he had never seen such a pretty woman as Yuri—she was so gorgeous he thought he might lose his senses.

But under one layer of thin skin beneath her regular features lay a crushing pride that made itself known through the contempt in her way of addressing them, the superiority oozing at the edges of her words. For men who had made it through many adventures and were confident in their skill, the arrogance was obnoxious—enough to make them want to hurt her a little.

As elaborated on earlier, however, there was mounting evidence that suggested the overwhelming strength of these women (as contrary as their appearance made that seem), so the men couldn't quite commit themselves to a charge. One of them, struck by the maid party's killing intent, still looked plain scared.

Perhaps their best course of action was to retreat and involve the adventurers, especially Momon, in the fight.

“Now allow me to introduce your opponents.” Yuri clapped her hands twice. The sound carried surprisingly far, and the graveyard shook as if in response. “Come on out, Nazarick Old Guarders.”

“What?!” Palpatra yelped.

Behind them the ground split open, and multiple skeletons appeared.

Pincered?! No…

Looking up at the stairs, he saw that while the maids were hostile, any hint of a will to fight had disappeared. Perhaps one could say they’d gone into spectator mode. The workers couldn’t let down their guard, but at least for now there was no sign of the women attacking, as they had said.

Concluding that their opponents for the time being were the newcomer skeletons to the rear, Palpatra took a good look at them.

Skeletons weren’t such tough enemies. Palpatra and his team could be attacked by a hundred and methodically annihilate them without even getting scared. In that case, the eight skeletons that had crawled out of the ground weren’t opponents at all.

There was just one problem.

Palpatra and his teammates all swallowed hard and took an unconscious step back.

These didn’t seem like ordinary skeletons. They had different gear, too.

They wore quality breastplates, like the type of thing the bodyguards of some country’s leader would wear, carried kite shields emblazoned with a crest, and wielded a diverse array of weapons.

They wore composite longbows across their backs. And every bit of their gear had the sparkle of magical energy.

Skeletons armed with magic items couldn't be ordinary skeletons.

"What are those?"

"You don't know either, sir? I'm not positive, but I think… they're a subtype of skeleton warriors."

"A subtype? Well, they don't seem like red skeleton warriors…"

Facing an enemy they knew nothing about was terrifying, all the more so because that enemy was outfitted with magic items that had special effects.

"Judging from your numbers, we think this many will be enough. Do your best. Let's see how far you can run."

"To be given such powerful undead as opponents—what an honor! However…"

Palpatra thought calmly.

It would be no easy feat to ready an endless supply of fancily equipped undead. They must have come out swinging with their strongest force.

If they had something stronger, they never would have let the invasion begin.

"So this is the mightiest these ruins have to offer? Did you think you could stop us with these?"

When he looked up, he saw Yuri's eyes darting around—she was mildly shaken.

Bull's-eye, huh? I see. So this conversation was supposed to be

a trap...?

The smartest use of their most powerful forces would have been to defeat each enemy as it came inside the tomb. But considering the chance of not encountering them, maybe it was smarter to concentrate their forces on the exit—the place the physically and mentally exhausted raiders would have to pass after their search.

He could see through their aim. The maid's taunt to do their best at running away put the idea of fleeing in their heads, surely so she and her companions could attack them from behind with the advantage. They had multiple battles ahead, so of course they would want to minimize their losses.

So there was only one thing Palpatra and his team had to do.

"We just have to defeat all the skeletons and break through, right?"

They had to fight off the Nazarick Old Guarders for the other teams who would return later.

The workers were rivals but also teammates. Besides, if the intention was for them to flee, it would be harder for the maids to catch them in their trap if they stood and fought instead. Keeping in mind the plan of getting Momon and the others into the battle if their opponents started to seem tough, Palpatra figured they should fight, knowing it was dangerous.

"Contrary to my plans, we're the canaries... My head hurts. Do you think that's all of them?"

"It's hard to imagine they could have more undead with that level of gear."

"This is a path any raiders would have to take. So putting their strongest force here is an optimal strategy. That means it's proba-

bly all of them, right? I don't think they'd make any stupid mistakes in how they split up their troops, given that they're better informed than us."

"No, I wouldn't be surprised if there were more inside. But most of the ones that are left are probably less powerful."

"Sir…let's make a run for it. Those things are bad. Really bad."

"There's been nowhere to run from the moment we were flanked. Even if we tried to fly away, they'd shoot us with their bows. We have to hold our ground! Beating them is the only way to survive!"

As Palpatra shouted, there came a voice from above that sounded somewhere between surprised and derisive. "Well, that's one way to do it. We're rooting for you. Now, please begin."

With her voice as the trigger, the Nazarick Old Guarders charged.

Yuri and the others repeated their "encouragements" with troubled expressions.

The scene playing out before them was so unexpected, they couldn't conceal their surprise. *Are they really this…?*

"Boy, they're doomed."

"…I never guessed they would be so…"

"Master Cocytus is also surprised."

"AT THIS RATE…IT'S GOING TO END BEFORE THEY GET TO THE GOOD PART…"

A hammer descended as they watched.

"Ah, this is bad. They're gonna die."

At Lupusregina's quiet comment, a man took the hit to his chest and crumpled to the ground.

The sound of metal screeching and something heavy falling—even in the midst of the fierce fight, these sounds echoed out clearly.

The first one to die was a human warrior. The Nazarick Old Guarder who'd clobbered him with a lightning-imbued hammer unsmilingly shifted its aim to its next prey.

"Mr. Priest, hurry up and heal or your warrior's gonna die!" Yuri seemed concerned.

"...No. He died instantly. And now their line is broken," Shizu replied, shaking her head.

The two Nazarick Old Guarders who had been facing the warrior were freed up, so one of them headed toward the priest, and the other moved on to the rear guard. The priest had already had two on him, and now he would have to face another. He didn't have time to cast anymore. It was all he could do to withstand the attacks coming at him from three directions.

The only one putting up a decent fight was Palpatra, but he was facing three of them, so he didn't have any leeway to go to the rescue.

"Thieves don't have enough attack power. Do you have any kind of ace move?" The arcane caster protecting the thief had to fight another monster. That made two. A thief's light weapons were definitely not powerful enough against armor-clad undead, which couldn't be killed in one well-aimed strike. He could dodge nimbly, but the difference between exhaustible humans and inexhaustible undead was huge.

"They're looking at us like they're going to start crying."

“Should we wave?”

“SURE, WE CAN DO THAT MUUUCH.”

“’Kay, ’kay.” Lupusregina grinned and waved at Palpatra.

“……He got hit.”

“Because you distracted him, Lupu.”

“Urgh! You mean it’s my fault?!”

“……Yes. It’s your fault. But we can root for them… Hang in there…”

“Yeah, we need them to hang in there.”

Everyone nodded at Yuri’s remark.

In their battle with Palpatra’s worker team, the Nazarick Old Guarders kept the pressure on the entire time. The workers’ resistance was so futile, the game so one-sided, that Yuri and the other maids began to pity them.

They’d laughed at first. *Why were they so confident before the battle started?* But the fight was not even worth watching. They yawned and even started encouraging the workers.

“Agh, it’s so one-sided I don’t even know what to say.”

“……They don’t have any ace moves?”

“Maybe it was the summoning spell he just cast?”

“Tier three?”

“Nah, that’s too weak to be an ace move. But I do think their idea to build a wall with summoned monsters was a good one.”

“For sure. If the attacks hadn’t reached, they might have been able to regroup.”

“BUUUT FLYING WAS A BAD MOOOVE. THE WRINKLY ONE EVEN SAID SOOO…”

“It wasn’t clear if he was trying to run away or cast magic from above…”

“……Perfect for target practice.”

The arcane caster had already taken a critical hit and fallen to the ground. If his hands had been free, he could have cast a healing spell or used a potion and returned to the fight, but he didn’t have the energy. In the end, the thief covered him, and he had his hands full trying not to get finished off.

“I wonder why they underestimated the Old Guarders so badly.”

That was a question.

Maybe they’d just been thinking things would go their way? Not because they were stupid but to distract themselves from despair and rouse their courage. Maybe their survival instincts as human beings had maxed themselves out.

“Either way, looks pretty hopeless.”

“Yeah. Things are going downhill.”

“IF THEY HAD A CHANCE, I GUESS IT WOULD BE TO FOCUS ON DEFENSE AND BUY TIME UNTIL THE OTHER BURGLARS RETURNED?”

Everyone’s chilling gazes pierced Entoma.

“You don’t think they’re actually going to come back, do you?”

"……It's obvious they won't."

"It's impossible. No one can get out of the Great Tomb of Nazarick alive."

An agonized scream along with the sound of something collapsing. The combat maids looked in the direction the sound had come from and voiced their disappointment.

"AH, THERE GOES THE THIEEEF."

"That's that, then."

"Maybe we should have given in when they begged for their lives…"

"But they were so sure they would win! Anyone would think they had some kind of trick up their sleeves."

The thick scent of fresh blood the thief must have spattered reached the maids.

"SMELLS GOOOOD…"

"Leave them," Yuri said reprovingly.

They'd been ordered by their master to gather up all the incapacitated, whether dead or alive. There was no way they could be so rude as to present him with bodies with bites taken out of them.

"FRESH MEEEAT…"

"I'll ask Lord Ainz later, so please control yourself for now."

"Isn't this kind of bad, though? Weren't we supposed to be testing to see if the minions could deal with escapees?"

"I think so. That's why there are such strong undead waiting

near the walls."

"MASTER COCYTUS SEEMS TO HAVE TAKEN THE SCENARIO IN WHICH THEY ARE CAUGHT TOO EASILY INTO ACCOUUUNT."

"That they would challenge the Old Guarders head-on was a surprise."

"That's what happens when you don't analyze your opponent's strength. Okay, anyone who is breathing even a little, heal them and send them to the torture chamber. The dead ones…let's report to Lord Ainz."

Thus, that night, the worker team led by Palpatra disappeared.

2

"Push them back!" Gringham's shout echoed in the burial chamber filled with the stench of mold and death.

The room was twenty yards square. The ceiling was high, probably sixteen feet. The figures practically overflowing the place could be seen by the magic light a caster had created plus a torch that had fallen to the floor.

Gringham and his team, Heavy Masher, had been driven into a corner. The rest of the burial chamber was crawling with zombies and skeletons, a mob of low-tier undead.

There were so many it was absurd to try to count.

Gringham and a warrior with a shield took the muddy torrent of death head-on, creating a bank so it wouldn't reach the rear

guard.

Zombie fists pelted Gringham's full plate armor. As corpses, they were more powerful than regular humans, but there was no way they could damage steel armor. Their rotting, fragile hands smashed against it, leaving behind foul-smelling scraps of decomposing meat.

The skeletons were the same. There was no way their rusty swords were going to pierce enchanted armor.

Sure, coincidences were conceivable, but thanks to the magic defense they'd cast, none occurred.

Gringham swept his ax through the area in front of him, but as soon as one undead fell, another stepped up to take its place. They kept closing in, all but crushing the workers.

"Dammit! There're too many of them!" The warrior with the shield next to Gringham let his distress slip. The shield was big enough to cover his entire body, so no attacks were connecting, but its entire surface was slick with foul liquids.

He was bashing in the heads of zombies and skeletons with his mace, but even so, he was losing to the pressure, slowly retreating.

"Where the hell did they all come from?!"

The warrior's question was a natural one.

After parting with the other teams at an intersection, they had searched a number of rooms. Unfortunately, they hadn't discovered as much treasure as had been in the smaller mausoleums. Still, they'd found a decent sum, and they had continued steadily making their way, bit by bit, through other rooms. Then they had entered this one, and when they began investigating, the door suddenly flew open and so many undead flooded in that no one

could guess where they'd come from.

Zombies and skeletons weren't such terrifying foes. But with these numbers, they could do a great deal of damage.

If the workers got pulled down and buried, even if they didn't die, they wouldn't be able to move. Then the undead would descend on the rear guard.

Not that Gringham thought they would fall so easily, but against the threat of these numbers, he was a bit worried.

At this rate, it's sheer luck that our line is holding. Having made that observation, Gringham unleashed a power he'd been saving.

"Let us finish them all at once! I'm counting on you!"

The rear guard, who until now had just been throwing rocks, leaped into action.

Really, for Gringham and the other members of Heavy Masher, undead like these weren't so tough. That's why the rear guard had been on standby, saving their energy as much as possible. Once those reinforcements were in action, mopping up these undead would be a cinch.

"Our god, god of earth! Cast out the impure ones!" Clenching his sigil, the priest's shout became his strength.

Something refreshing entered the atmosphere, like a pure breeze had blown through the burial chamber to sweep away its foul air—a stronger than normal wave of holy energy. It was the priest's exorcism ability.

At the same time, beginning with the ones nearest the priest, the undead crumbled and turned to ashes.

In the case of an overwhelmingly large ability gap, undead

could be destroyed instead of merely exorcized. But destroying a large number of undead was quite a bit more difficult and required that much more energy.

In the end, twenty were annihilated at once.

"Fly, Fireball!" An arcane caster launched a fireball, and it exploded right in the center of the undead mob. Flames blazed for only a split second, and the zombies and skeletons in range collapsed, their false life burned up.

"I'm not done yet! Fireball!"

"Our god, god of earth! Cast out the impure ones!"

Additional area-of-effect attacks decimated the undead.

"Let's go!"

"Right!"

The warrior abandoned his shield, brandished his mace with both hands, and accompanied Gringham into the mob. The reason they charged in even though the casters could have made short work of the undead was that they preferred saving the magical energy. The priest's exorcism, especially, had a limited number of uses. His specialization in anti-undead moves made him an essential asset in this tomb.

Leaping into a group of zombies, Gringham swung his ax. A liquid less like blood and more like glop oozed—if their hearts had been beating, it would have sprayed—from the stumps of severed body parts. A nauseating smell wafted out of the cuts, but it wasn't more than he could stomach.

Or rather, his nose just couldn't even distinguish it any longer.

He worked with the warrior to attack, attack, attack. Defense didn't even cross their minds.

They were able to make such a reckless offensive because they had magic support and tough armor and because they were up against such weak undead.

Now and then Gringham felt the shock of a zombie punch to his head, but his helmet absorbed it, and the burden on his neck was almost nonexistent. His chest and abdomen may have been getting punched as well, but sure enough, he didn't really feel it.

After all, their opponents were undead of the lowest tier. The number of them was what had made things tense; now that the cleanup had progressed to some degree, they began to feel more comfortable.

Without pausing his swings, the warrior shouted, "We've only encountered small fries, but this tomb sure has a lot of 'em!"

"That in itself means there could be a stronger one somewhere. That said, if there is one, I don't get why it doesn't come out."

The who one answered was the priest, who had picked up the warrior's shield and was watching the progress of the battle from behind them.

"...Mm, these undead might have been summoned somehow, like with ritual magic or an item."

Strangely, the undead vanished after a set amount of time, so there weren't so many of them that there was nowhere to stand. The wizard had warned the team because he noticed their disappearance was vaguely similar to the way summoned undead expired.

"A way to summon a huge number of low-tier undead? ...No, sir! Do not make me imagine this entire tomb crammed full of zombies!" Gringham answered as he sliced off the head of a skeleton like he was cutting a branch off a tree. Then he flicked his

eyes around the room. He could count the number of undead on two hands. The door was still open, but no new monsters were coming in. *A little more fighting and this battle will be over.*

Just as he thought that, he was assailed by a creeping sensation that started at his feet.

His ability to sense danger was ordering him to get out of there, but that was next to impossible under the circumstances. Still—

"Watch out! Leave the r—!" The thief must have sensed the same thing.

But it was too late. The hard, sturdy floor abruptly morphed into something that couldn't be relied on. Instead, the workers felt like they were floating. A beat later, they lost their balance and smashed into the floor.

Gringham could hear his teammates groaning in pain. He, however, had managed to keep hold of his ax despite the fall and destroyed the skeletons on the floor with it as he got to his feet.

"Annihilate them!"

The undead had taken damage in the fall—especially the skeletons, who were weak against impact damage—so they were easier to kill than before.

After finishing them off, Gringham finally took a look around the room.

They must have dropped to the bottom of a magical pitfall where the floor of the room simply vanished. When he looked up, the ceiling was so far away—eyeballing it, probably almost forty feet. About ten feet up was a closed door, and another ten feet up —a total of twenty—was an open door. That was the one they'd come through originally. It probably made sense to assume they

had fallen two stories.

Overall, the construction of the room could perhaps best be described as a tall, four-sided pillar with a floor that sloped steeply downward like an inverted square pyramid; if they weren't careful, they would slide down to the lowest point in the center of the room. Actually, one of his teammates had tumbled to the center in their original fall and was in danger of being buried under the zombies that tumbled down after them.

Gringham couldn't believe they had plunged into such a place virtually unharmed.

The strange thing was that ten feet up, at the height of the closed door, there were sixteen passages, four on each wall of the room.

"It seems like a water torture chamber. It'd just come gushing out of those passageways… Ugh. Or slime—that would be even worse!"

"I totally agree. Let's hurry up and investigate that door. If it's safe, let's escape through it."

It would, naturally, be difficult to scale two stories of a wall that had no handholds. The only one who could do it was probably the thief. For those in full plate armor, like Gringham, it would be nearly impossible. While the unknown lower door made them anxious, it would be easier to reach.

As they were discussing how to go about climbing up, some things poked their heads out of the sixteen passageways, all at about the same time. They were corpses so swollen they looked like they were about to burst: plague bombers.

Bulging with hoarded-up negative energy, plague bombers, which resembled chunks of meat, were exasperating undead that exploded when attacked, dealing damage to the living and healing

undead.

They jumped. Crashing into the floor, their bodies made a sickening sound, but the problem was what happened next. The rotund monsters falling onto the steep slope rolled down like boulders toward Gringham and his team.

“Look out! Dodge ’em!”

“You don’t need to tell me twice—I’m the brains of this team!”

They all—including the whimpering wizard—just barely managed to evade the monsters, which continued rolling down to the center of the inverted square pyramid.

When the next plague bombers peeked their horrible faces out of the passages, Gringham realized that these had been just the first wave and got an idea of what was in store for them.

“Run! These things are going to bury us!”

If they were hit by one of the plague bombers and tumbled to the center, they were sure to be crushed. If that didn’t kill them, repeated hits of negative energy from the bursting monsters their teammates were fighting would.

“What a treacherous trap! Someone give me a boost!”

“Don’t be ridiculous! We wouldn’t be able to dodge if we did that!”

Even if they managed to evade the falling monster, their balance would be off, so they wouldn’t be able to dodge the next attack. Asking someone to be a foothold under those circumstances was too much.

“Then I’ll use magic!”

“Don’t Fly! You’re not strong enough to carry us all up there.”

“No! Not—agh, watch out—that! Web Ladder!”

“That could work! Aim for the closer door! Gringham, cover him!”

“No! Stop! We’ll escape through the door two stories up, the one we came in through! The lower one is too dangerous!”

They didn’t have time to ask what gave him that idea, but they trusted him.

“Web Ladder!”

The spell created a spiderweb that led straight to the door two stories up. The magic spiderweb’s stronger-than-normal adhesion was sticky when one wanted to be fixed to the web and released when one wanted to move again. The spell really could be used just like a ladder.

With rushed but flawless movements, Gringham and his team climbed up the web one after the other like prayer beads on a string.

When they finally reached the open door, Gringham cautiously looked inside. Getting shoved from there and falling all the way down would have been unbearable.

He sighed in relief. They seemed to have escaped the scenario he’d been afraid of; there were no undead in sight.

Having confirmed that, he scrambled into the hallway and began hauling the others up.

“We’re saved! Getting crushed to death by undead has got to be up there among the worst possible ways to die.”

“These ruins are built in a pretty nasty way. I hurt my leg a bit in the fall. Can you heal me?”

“I thought I felt my toes tingling in the explosions of negative energy. That was terrifying!”

“I was lucky I even managed to dodge! Don’t make your wizard dodge!”

Everyone grumbled, breathing raggedly.

“Hey, Gringham. Why did we avoid that door? I kinda thought it might actually be the right way. It would be logical to make the correct route dangerous, right?”

“It’s just a hunch, but…try attacking it with a weapon we don’t need.” Gringham gave a raw answer, having run out of poise, and the thief immediately threw a dagger.

Just as it hit—or would have—part of the door swelled up to form a tentacle and slapped it away.

“It’s…a door imitator! Er, no, judging from the color of the appendage, an undead door imitator! They capture opponents in a sticky liquid and go to town on them with their tentacles.”

“Tch! A plan B trap, huh? How tricky. Nice job seeing through it!”

“It was only intuition. No, honestly, all I did was choose the known over the unknown. And that spot was getting bathed in the negative energy bursts. I don’t think it affects nonliving things like doors so much, but I mainly doubted whether it really made sense to put a hallway there. Okay, should we get go—?”

Gringham abruptly closed his mouth. The thief who had been so chatty up until a minute ago had put a finger to his lips and was focusing his ears.

Gringham strained his own ears and noticed the regular sound of something hitting the floor.

Everyone looked in the direction the noise was coming from—down the hall.

"An enemy…I guess? I wish they'd give us time to rest."

"Yeah, if there's one sound and whatever's making it isn't even trying to move stealthily, it must be an enemy. I'll be glad if this is the end of them…"

All of them quietly drew their weapons. The warrior took his shield back and stood at the front, protecting one side of his body. The wizard had his glowing staff pointed down the hall, ready to cast at any moment. The priest raised his sigil, and the thief took aim with his bow.

The tapping sound grew louder, and finally the thing making it came into view.

A gorgeous yet worn robe was wrapped around a figure thinner than a young girl. The noise must have been the gnarled staff the figure held in one hand.

The thing had a face—a bit of skin stretched over bone, beginning to rot—that contained a dark wisdom. The negative energy its body gave off hung around it, mist-like.

It was an undead caster. It was called—

"An elder lich!" the wizard, first to identify the monster, cried out.

Yes. It was the worst sort of monster, which appeared when negative life occupied the corpse of an evil caster.

The moment they heard it was an elder lich, Gringham and his teammates changed formation. They staggered positions so no one was obstructed and kept some distance from one another as a precaution against area-of-effect spells.

An elder lich was a fairly strong enemy; for platinum-rank adventurers it would still be pretty difficult, while a mythril-rank team would have a decent enough chance of winning.

For Gringham's team, if they didn't think about how tired they were, they could defeat it. Luckily, this time he'd brought along members who were quite strong against undead. That was encouraging.

It would have been tough to fight if the lich had kept some distance, but at this range, he felt they could probably gain the advantage.

"So this is the master of the tomb!" That's what Gringham had concluded. An elder lich was a ruler. They controlled mobs of undead and sometimes had dealings with the living.

There were even famous elder liches, like the captain of the ghost ship that sometimes sailed through the fog on the Katze Plain or the one ruling an abandoned castle.

If this one was an elder lich like them, it wouldn't be any surprise if it were the master of the tomb.

"So we hit the jackpot? Super lucky!"

"Uh, it's not like the request was to kill the master of the tomb, you know."

"Shall we show it the might of Heavy Masher?"

"Let's show it our divine protection!"

Everyone chimed in excitedly. They roared to chase off the fear of facing such a powerful enemy.

"We need defense magic and…" Just as Gringham was about to shout the plan of attack to his determined teammates, he was assailed by the feeling something was off. He understood its

cause immediately. It was the enemy before them, the elder lich.

"……What is it?"

"We're not…taking it by surprise, are we?"

Although the party was in full sight, the elder lich didn't make a single move. It didn't raise its staff or begin casting a spell. It simply watched them in silence.

The workers couldn't contain their confusion. The monster had obliterated their prediction that it would engage them immediately, but now they hesitated to make the first move and attack.

Certainly undead were hostile to the living, but it was also true that some of the intelligent ones could negotiate. Usually if a living thing initiated, the terms went in favor of the undead, but if the undead proposed a truce, one could sometimes acquire an item made with technology lost long ago.

In any case, when it came to an enemy as powerful as an elder lich, there was nothing better than getting through an encounter without fighting. Perhaps it was irritated that its traps hadn't finished them off, but there was also the possibility that it recognized their ability and had chosen the peaceful path of striking a deal.

Thinking that way, it was horribly thoughtless to make the first move and attack. That would mean completely abandoning potential negotiations. But they were in enemy territory. With no secure escape route, they risked a tough battle ahead.

The team exchanged glances and concluded they were all thinking the same thing.

Speaking on behalf of the team was the job of the leader, naturally.

"Excuse us for intruding. You seem to be the master of this

tomb. We—”

The elder lich turned its awful face to Gringham and pointed a bony finger at him.

It meant, *Shut up*.

The gesture didn’t seem very elder lich–like at all, but he wasn’t brave—no, suicidal—enough to say it to the powerful monster’s face.

Gringham obediently shut his mouth. Then in the hallway over which silence had fallen once more, he heard *that* sound again, and strained his ears in spite of himself.

It was the familiar sound of something tapping against the floor—but of more than one something.

Gringham and his teammates all looked at one another. Upon hearing the sound, the conclusion they had arrived at was inconceivable.

Then they all shrieked at once.

“Who said this elder lich was the master of the tomb?!”

“Sorry! It was me!”

“Are you fucking kidding me? This can’t be happening!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa—there’s no way we can win this!”

“Even divine protection has its limits!”

More elder liches appeared from behind the first one—six of them.

That meant a total of seven immensely powerful undead casters.

Certainly since they were all one race, their method of attack would be the same. If only they had a way to neutralize all the monsters' attacks, they would be able to defeat all seven of them.

Of course, they didn't have such a way, and neither could they possibly acquire one.

Under those impossible circumstances, Gringham and his team completely lost the will to fight.

"Now then, shall we begin?"

As the elder lich, who had not the slightest intention of negotiating, spoke, the seven staves were slowly raised.

At the same time, Gringham's scream rang out. "Retreat!"

As if they'd been just waiting for him to say the word, everyone ran as fast as they could. They raced in the opposite direction of the elder liches. Of course, they didn't have the presence of mind to consider what might be at the end of the hallway. They just wanted to survive the excessive power of the mob of elder liches a little longer.

At the front of the line was the thief. Then came Gringham, the wizard, the priest, and the warrior.

The workers ran. They ran with no misgivings.

A corner. Normally, they would be on the lookout for monsters or traps, but with footsteps coming after them, they didn't have time to make cautious observations. They left their fates to chance and raced on.

Both sides of the hallway had stone doors, but when they imagined the possibility of dead ends, the courage to open one was nowhere to be found.

The clanking of the workers in metal armor as they ran echoed

off the walls. The noise could have given away their position to other monsters, but they didn't have the presence of mind to cast Silence.

They ran, and ran, and ran.

They pumped their legs in a frenzy, turned random corners, and got lost after sprinting down each hallway; they no longer had any idea where they were.

They would have liked to get back to the entrance, but they didn't have the wherewithal.

"Are they still behind us?" Gringham shouted as they ran.

The warrior bringing up the rear answered, "Yeah! They're running after us!"

"Dammit!"

"Don't run! Use Fly!"

"If they flew over here, the next thing that would fly at us would be spells, you idiot!"

"Let's hole up in one of these little rooms and try to negotiate!" the wizard shouted, gasping for air. He was the weakest of the group and seemed about ready to collapse.

This is bad, thought Gringham. *Physically, he's not going to last much longer.*

Undead monsters like elder liches didn't get tired. If Gringham and his men kept getting chased, they would slowly be killed off as they ran out of energy.

"Why the heck are there that many elder liches…?"

Common sense said this situation couldn't be.

“The master of this tomb must be stronger than an elder lich, huh?”

That was the only answer that made sense. But did such an undead even exist? Gringham didn’t know.

“Dammit! This fucking tomb!” the wheezing warrior at the end of the line screamed.

As if on cue, a crest appeared glowing in the floor. It was big enough to capture all of Gringham and his teammates inside.

“Wha—?!”

Someone’s voice, something like a scream, rang out…

This floating sensation was different from the fall earlier.

Gringham’s field of vision was enveloped in pitch-black. He could hear things crunching and snapping underfoot and sensed his body slowing sinking. It felt like he’d been thrown into a swamp. He panicked for a split second before realizing it didn’t seem terribly deep. He sank to about his hips but no farther.

In the darkness ruled by quiet, he asked in the timid voice of a boy who’d lost sight of his parents, “…Is anybody there?”

“Over here, Gringham.” The voice of the thief gave an immediate answer—and from not too far away. He was probably about as far away as he had been while they were running.

“…Is anyone else around?”

There was no reply. He’d expected as much. If there wasn’t a light, it meant his wizard and warrior weren’t around. He just had to count himself lucky the thief was there.

“…Seems like it’s just us.”

“Thou art…tch! Ya, you’re right.”

He scanned their surroundings without taking a single step. The deep darkness went on forever, and a fear welled up inside him—he couldn’t tell where the darkness stopped and his body started.

There’s no sign of anything moving, but…

“Should we turn on a light?”

“Guess we have to.”

It was unfortunate, but despite countless worries—moving would break the silence, maybe it would trigger a trap—their human eyes couldn’t penetrate the darkness. They needed a light no matter what.

“Okay, just a sec.”

Gringham sensed some rummaging around from the direction of the thief. Then a light appeared.

The first thing he saw was the thief holding up the Fluorescent Stick. Next, innumerable gleams, reflections of the light. It reminded him of the treasure they’d seen in the mausoleum—but something was different.

Gringham frantically bit back the scream that welled up deep in his throat. The thief’s face also seemed to cramp up.

The countless reflections, the sparkles, were bugs—cockroaches—that completely buried the area. The smallest were the size of the tip of his pinkie finger, but the largest were over three feet long. Layers upon layers of cockroaches.

The crunching sensation beneath his feet was trampled cockroaches. Considering the bugs were piled up to his hips, he didn’t want to imagine how many of them there must have been.

The room was so large the light didn't reach its walls. Considering the range of a Fluorescent Stick was around fifteen yards, they got an idea of how big the room was. When they looked up at the ceiling, there were a great many cockroaches reflecting the light there as well.

"Where…are we…?" the thief gasped in a murmur.

Gringham understood how he felt. He must have thought the bugs would start to move if he raised his voice.

"What the hell happened?"

As the thief scanned the area, Gringham recalled the scene before they found themselves in this darkness, the magic circle that had appeared on the floor, and asked, "…Probably a pitfall, no?"

"No, it can't be that. I think we were hit by some magic…"

"A teleportation trap…? Or did the elder liches cast something?"

Teleportation spells were normal. For instance, there was the tier-three escape spell, Dimensional Move. But that only teleported the user. To teleport someone else—and more than one person at that—

"There's some tier-six spell that can teleport multiple people, I think, right?"

"Ahh yeah, I think you're right."

"But could there really be someone who can use it…?"

Gringham didn't even know of that many casters who could use tier five. But it still made sense to him. He could see how there would be multiple elder liches here if such an absolute power existed. It would probably have no problem dominating them and ordering them around.

It hit Gringham what a dangerous place this tomb was, and he shuddered. He also felt a hostility toward the count, the requester, appear inside him. Of course, it was Gringham and his team who had taken the job; they'd understood the risks and bet the chips of their lives. If someone had said he was just blaming his problems out on the count, there wouldn't have been any way to argue.

But the count should have been informed to some degree. If he weren't, he wouldn't have made the request to survey the tomb, offered such a large reward, gathered together so many workers, and sent them there.

"So he was sitting on some info? Shit… Let's hurry up and get out of here. These ruins…should have been left untouched."

"Yeah, sounds good. I'll go out in front, Gringham. Follow me."

It seemed like the thief hadn't realized yet—that none of the cockroaches were moving one bit—but that was probably for the best.

Gringham flicked his eyes over all the cockroaches before him.

From the way their feelers were moving slightly, he could tell they weren't dead, but they didn't budge. An uncanny feeling he couldn't place took root in his mind.

"No, I doubt you can escape."

Suddenly, a third voice sounded.

"Who's there?"

Gringham and the thief scanned the area in a panic but couldn't sense anything moving.

"Oh, how rude of me. I am the Prince of Fear, the one who was

granted this realm by Lord Ainz. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

When they looked in the direction the voice came from, something strange appeared in their line of sight. Something was shoving the cockroaches aside, trying to get out from beneath them.

They weren't at a range where they could use close-proximity weapons. The thief silently drew his bow. Gringham moved to get out his sling—but stopped. He thought if it came to it, he would wade through the cockroaches and cut the thing.

Before long, the creature pushing through the other cockroaches emerged—and it was yet another cockroach.

But it had an elegance that set it apart from its surrounding brethren. This cockroach was nearly a foot tall and stood upright on two legs.

It wore a brilliant red cape gorgeously bordered in gold thread, and a golden crown sparkled on its head. In its forelegs, it carried a scepter with a pure-white jewel at the tip.

The strangest thing of all was that despite standing upright, its head was still pointed at Gringham and the thief. If a normal insect stood upright, its head would, of course, point up. But this odd being before them was different.

Besides that, there wasn't anything else in particular to separate it from the other cockroaches. But that one difference was plenty.

The worker pair exchanged glances and decided that Gringham would be in charge of negotiations. The thief still had an arrow nocked. Once Gringham made sure it was pointed down, he addressed the Prince of Fear. "Who…are you?"

"Hmm. It seems you weren't paying attention just now. Shall I

introduce myself again?"

"No, I don't mean like that—" Having gotten that far, Gringham realized that wasn't what he needed to be asking. "…I'll be blunt. Want to make a deal?"

"Oh-ho. A deal? I'm grateful to you both, so I'm not adverse to the idea."

The mystery contained in those words—what was he grateful for?—gave Gringham pause, but he wasn't in a position to ask.

"We would like…to be let out of this room unharmed."

"I see. That's only natural. But even if you got out of this room, we're currently on the second level of the Great Tomb of Nazarick. I must advise you, it would be extremely difficult to return to the surface."

The second level…

Gringham's eyes widened at the words.

"Am I right in thinking that the area through the door at a slight descent from the mausoleum on the surface is level one?"

"Isn't that the usual way to count them?"

"Well, yeah, but I just wanted to confirm."

"Ha-haa! Well, you were teleported from level one, so it makes sense that you're a little turned around."

With the cockroach before him somehow nodding its head, Gringham felt a freezing chill like he'd been stabbed with an icicle.

It was fear due to his earlier conversation with the thief being affirmed.

It meant that somehow—who knew?—someone had used teleportation magic like a trap. What kind of spell? What sort of technique? He wasn't a caster, but even he knew what an incredible feat that was.

"...It would be great if you would also tell us how to get out of the tomb, but we aren't hoping for that much. Letting us out of this room is fine."

"Hmm, hmm."

"In return, we'll...give you what you want."

"I see..." The Prince of Fear nodded emphatically and appeared to be thinking things over.

A short time passed in the quiet room. Soon enough, the Prince of Fear seemed to have made up his mind and spoke.

"I already have what I want. Anything you are capable of offering is insufficient."

Gringham was about to speak, but the prince held up his forelegs to silence him and continued.

"But before we get to that, you seem to be wondering why I'm grateful to you, so I will satisfy that curiosity now. My kin are sick and tired of cannibalism; thus, you two delectable morsels have my thanks."

"Wha—?!"

The moment he comprehended the words, the thief loosed his arrow.

It flew through the air, got caught in the prince's cape, and fell impotently.

Then the room began to squirm.

With myriad rustling noises, the prince's kin formed something gigantic.

And there was a tsunami.

A dark torrent.

"It's a terrible shame that there are only two of you, but please try to fill the stomachs of my kin."

The massive, swollen wave engulfed Gringham and the thief. It was exactly like they'd been hit by a tidal wave.

As he was swallowed up by the black maelstrom, Gringham frantically batted at the cockroaches coming in through the gaps in his armor.

A weapon wouldn't work against a mass of tiny insects, but Gringham didn't have any area-of-effect attacks. It was faster to just swat them with his hands. For that reason, he'd already thrown away his weapon and had no idea where it had gone.

He tried to flail his arms, but it was difficult to move now that he was completely covered in bugs. The scene was like a drowning man's floundering. The only sound he could hear was the scrabbling of countless cockroaches.

It was impossible to make out the voice of his teammate, the thief, over the din.

But of course he couldn't hear the thief's voice. The thief was in no condition to speak due to the cockroaches crawling into his mouth, down his throat, and even into his stomach.

Gringham felt prickling pains here and there; the cockroaches that had invaded through the cracks in his armor were gnawing at him.

"N—!" He tried to scream, but cockroaches plugged up his

mouth. He frantically spat them out, but others forced their way through the slight part in his lips. And his mouth crawled with them.



Perhaps small ones had entered his ears? The rustling grew awfully loud, and he started to itch.

Innumerable cockroaches squirmed on his face, biting into him. Pain in his eyelids, but he couldn't open his eyes. It was easy to guess what would happen if he did.

Gringham had already understood what would become of him—that at this rate, he would be eaten alive by cockroaches.

"I can't stand this!" he screamed, and the bugs poured in. They tried to wriggle down his throat. Then he felt something slip down and drop into his stomach. The sensation of a live cockroach running amok in his belly made him sick.

He struggled for all he was worth.

I don't want to die like this.

He wanted to show up his older brothers. That was the driving force that had gotten him here.

He'd already saved enough money to live comfortably without adventuring anymore, and with his reputation, he could wed the kind of beautiful girl one would never meet in a village. Whether in power or wealth, he should have already surpassed his brothers—he had won at life.

So he didn't want to meet his end like this.

"Aghblorgh—aagh! I'm getting out of here aliiiive!" he screamed, spitting out chewed-up cockroaches.

"You're really hanging on, aren't you? Well, let's have seconds."

A few moments later, even his screams were swallowed up by the black maelstrom.

The man's eyes snapped open.

His field of vision contained a ceiling. It was made of stone and something giving off white light was embedded in it. He couldn't understand why he was there, and when he tried to look around, he realized he couldn't move his head. No, not only his head. His wrists, ankles, hips, and chest had been tied to something—he was essentially immobilized.

The incomprehensible situation frightened him, and he wanted to scream, but there was something fitted to his mouth that prevented him from closing it or speaking.

As he was desperately rolling his eyes around, trying to take in the area, he heard a voice.

"Oh? You're awake?"

A deep, rough voice. He couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman.

A horrifying monster moved into his field of vision.

Although it had a human body, its head resembled a warped octopus. Six tentacles hung down to around its thighs, wriggling.

The thing's skin tone was the muddled white of a drowning victim. Just like a drowning victim, its body was bloated, and instead of clothes, it was bound in a few black leather belts. They pressed into its flesh like the string used to tie a roast, and the resulting sight was awful. If a beautiful woman had been wearing them, she would have been alluring, but this terrible monster was sickening.

It had four thin, webbed fingers per hand. Its nails were long, but they were all gorgeously manicured with strange art.

That was the weird creature who turned its pale, murky, pupilless eyes on the man.

“Ooh-hoo-hoo! Did you sleep all right, honey?”

He just panted.

Shock and horror. Those two emotions combined to make his breath rough. A hand caressed his cheek with the kindness a mother would use to calm a frightened child.

It felt horribly cold and clammy and sent shudders through his entire body.

It would have been perfect if it had smelled like blood and rot, but instead it carried the pleasant scent of flowers. That only terrified him further.

“Oh, you don’t have to be scared to the point of shrinking like that!”

The monster was eyeing his crotch. He only now realized, from the feeling of the air on his skin, that he was naked.

“Umm, perhaps I should ask your name, honey.”

A thin finger poked into the area that seemed to be the monster’s cheek, and it cocked its head. If a pretty girl had done it, it would have been nice to see, but this was an octopus-headed, drowned-body monster. All he felt was hatred and fear.

“…”

The monster smiled at him as his eyes darted around. Its mouth was completely concealed by its tentacles, and its expression had hardly changed. The way he knew it had smiled was that its cold, glass-like eyes had narrowed.

“Ooh-hoo-hoo-hoo! So you don’t want to say? What a cutie, all bashful.”

The monster ran a finger over his bare chest as if writing

something, but all he felt was the terror that his heart might be ripped out at any moment.

"First, I'll tell you *my* name, honey-bunny." Syrupy words that seemed punctuated with heart marks—in that deep, coarse voice. "I'm Neuronist, the Great Tomb of Nazarick's Special Officer of Intelligence Gathering. Well, I'm also called the Officer of Torture…"

The long tentacles undulated, revealing the mouth at their base. A tube slipped out like a tongue from the opening lined with pointy fangs. It was just like a straw.

"Pretty soon I'll give you a little kiss and *slurrrp*."

What are you going to slurp?! Disturbed, he tried to move, but he was completely restrained.

"Now then, now then. So, we caught you."

Yes. The last thing he remembered was Gringham and the thief running ahead of him disappearing. From then up until now was a blank.

"You must at least know where you are." Neuronist smiled and went on. "This is the Great Tomb of Nazarick where the last of the Forty-One Supreme Beings, Lord Momo—no, Ainz resides. It's the most sacred place in the world."

"Row Aith?"

"Yes, Lord Ainz." Although he couldn't pronounce things properly, Neuronist understood and ran its hands over his skin. "He's one of the Forty-One Supreme Beings. He was once their leader. And he's so, so wonderful. If you see him someday, you'll want to devote yourself to him, too! If he called me to bed, I'd even let him be my first time." The monster didn't fidget but fairly writhed back and forth, as if embarrassed. "Hey, listen to this."

The monster doodled with a finger on his chest in the same way a bashful young girl would toy with her hands. “Last time Lord Ainz came here, he was staring at my body! It was the gaze of a male selecting his prey. And then he awkwardly averted his eyes! Oh, it gave me butterflies in my chest and chills down my spine.”

It suddenly stopped moving and leaned closer to peer into his eyes. He was desperate to escape from the odd-looking thing, but his body didn’t budge.

“Little Shalltear and ugly Albedo both seem to be after Lord Ainz’s affections, too, but I definitely have more charm than them! Don’t you think?”

“Yeth, I thoo.”

What would happen to me if I didn’t agree? The fear made him answer in the affirmative.

Neuronist smiled and, clasping its hands together, gazed into space. It looked just like a religious fanatic praying to the heavens.

“Ooh-hoo-hoo. You’re so nice, honey. Or are you simply telling the truth as it is? But why doesn’t he call me, then…? Ahh, Lord Ainz… I love how stoic he can be…”

Its emotional trembling reminded him of the writhing of a fat annelid.

It sighed. “Ah, he makes me quiver. Oh, but I’m so sorry for rambling on like this.”

Please just forget me. But Neuronist ignored his thoughts and continued.

“I’ll go ahead and tell you what fate has in store for you. Do you know what a choir is?”

He blinked blankly at the sudden question.

Perhaps deciding his confusion meant he didn't understand, Neuronist began to explain. "It's a chorus that sings sacred songs, hymns, to glorify and adore a god. I'm going to have you be a member. With your friend."

If that was all, it wouldn't be so bad. It wasn't as if he was confident in his singing, but he wasn't tone-deaf, either. Was this monster really after something so commonplace, though? Unable to conceal his creeping worry, he gave Neuronist a sidelong look.

"Really, honey. A choir. Even if you fools haven't sworn allegiance to Lord Ainz, singing loudly can be an offering to him. Yes, I want you to sing all together. Ahh, it gives me chills—gospel music from Neuronist to Lord Ainz!"

A foggy color came over its creepy eyes. Had it gotten overexcited from its own imaginings? Its thin fingers wriggled like bugs.

"Ooh-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo. Now then, I'll introduce your chorus's helpers."

They must have been in the corner of the room up until then; several figures abruptly moved into his field of vision.

Seeing the creatures made him forget to breathe for a moment—because it was clear from a glance that they were evil.

They wore fitted black leather aprons. Their bodies were paler than milk. Purple blood vessels were visible beneath that skin—if such a thing as purple blood existed.

Black leather masks with not even the tiniest gap covered their entire heads; how they saw anything or breathed was a mystery. And they had extremely long arms—they were about six and a half feet tall, but if they extended their arms, they probably would have reached past their knees.

They wore fully stocked tool belts around their hips.

There were four of these creatures.

“These are the torturers. These little dears are going to help me give you a wonderful singing voice.”

He had a bad feeling. Realizing what “singing” meant, he struggled frantically to escape. But as expected, he couldn’t move.

“It’s no use, honey. You can’t break the restraints with those puny muscles. These little dears will cast healing magic on you so you can practice a bunch!” It spoke in a tone that said, *I’m so nice, aren’t I?*

“Thop id!” he screamed with tears in his eyes.

“Hmm? What’s that? You want me to stop?” it asked him gently. Then it waved its six tentacles.

“Listen here, honey-bunny. We creations of the Supreme Beings are permitted to exist because he stayed behind. We exist to serve him. Do you really think we would show a crumb of mercy to a bunch of thieves who tramped into his house with their dirty feet? Really?”

“I’m thowwy!”

“Yes, that’s right. Repentance is vital.”

Neuronist took a thin rod out from somewhere. It was topped with a thorn less than a fifth of an inch long.

“First, I’ll use this.”

He didn’t know what it was for, so Neuronist gleefully explained.

“My creator suffered from a horrible little thing called urethral

calculus. So I'll perform this act in honor of him. You're all little right now, so I think it'll go in nice and easy."

"Noo, thop!"

Upon realizing what was about to happen, he began to sob, and Neuronist drew its face in close.

"We're going to be together for quite some time. Things'll be tough if you start crying now, honey."

3

The teams had all chosen different directions at an intersection, and Elya Uzruth chose the path straight ahead based on his unfounded belief that the strongest enemies would be in the back.

Along the way there had been stone doors and too many corners to count, but he just kept walking silently in what he felt was the right way. He was bored stiff by how uneventful it had been. Not only were there no monsters, there weren't even any traps.

Is this the wrong way? Elya wondered and clicked his tongue.

"You dolt. Keep going." He gave orders in a sharp tone to the elf slave he was making walk about ten yards ahead because it seemed like she was about to stop. She trembled a split second and then trudged forward. She'd barely been allowed any rest since they'd entered the tomb.

So far, luckily, nothing had happened, but if there was a trap, there was a good chance she'd die.

It was less like he was having her search for traps and more

like he was sending her into a mine as his canary. Elya's team was made up of himself and three elf slaves with different abilities: ranger, priest, druid. It was a waste to order her out front when he had no replacement for her search skills—but he had his reasons.

He was simply sick of her.

Many people hearing this would be shocked. Not from an ethical standpoint, but in terms of finances.

Slaves from the Slane Theocracy were not cheap. Especially for elves, the price could jump dramatically depending on their looks and what skills they possessed. Usually they fetched eye-popping prices; ordinary citizens couldn't hope to get their hands on one.

When it came to elves with skills, they were worth about as much as an enchanted weapon with some special effect. Even Elya couldn't shell out that much over and over.

But Elya took all of Tenbu's compensation for himself, so if things went well, he could make his money back quicker than one would guess. That was why if he was sick of an elf, he didn't have to worry if she died.

Next time I want one with slightly bigger breasts… That was what he was thinking as he watched the elf trudging ahead. *It's fun to grab 'em hard and make 'em scream…*

Since this was a joint job, he hadn't bedded an elf in several days. Not that anyone would complain if he did, but there could be some unpleasantness due to jealousy. Elya had enough common sense as a worker to know what a disadvantage that could become.

But the built-up desire was giving him daydreams.

"Or maybe next time I'll try to get one like that lady."

The one he had in mind was a member of Foresight—a half elf who always looked at him with loathing in her eyes.

She was truly a pain.

There was another woman, maybe more like a girl, on that team with her. He accepted the openly antipathetic way *she* looked at him. Women rarely understood a man's sex drive, and at her age, she probably thought boys had cooties. But he couldn't forgive the lower life-form looking at a human like the half elf did.

Even just remembering it caused the flames of anger to scorch his handsome features.

"I'd like to beat that disgusting face of hers until she can't resist anymore…"

By the time elf slaves reached their owner's hands, they'd had their spirit broken in various ways. An elf slave would never rebel.

But if he set his sights on that half elf, she would struggle against him like a wild animal. It wouldn't be difficult for him to break and conquer her, but he probably wouldn't make it through unscathed, and he wasn't at all confident he could take her alive.

Envisioning himself punching Imina several times in the face, he was slow to realize the elf walking ahead of him had stopped.

"Why did you stop? Walk."

"Eek…! I, uh, I hear a noise."

"A noise?" He frowned at the elf, who had mustered all her courage to answer, and focused all his attention on his ears. The area was silent—so still it hurt.

"…I don't hear it." Normally he would strike her at that point,

but elves had better hearing than humans. There was a good chance that even if he couldn't pick it up, the elves could. To confirm, he asked the other two next to him. "How about you two?"

"Y-yes, I hear something."

"Th-the sound of metal clanging."

"...Is that so?"

The sound of metal clanging would definitely not arise in nature.

So it had to be a sound someone was making. In other words, it was possible they would engage in combat for the first time since entering the tomb. The thought excited Elya.

"We're going to find whatever it is that's making that sound."

"Y-yes, sir."

He had the elf walk out front, and they proceeded in the direction of the noise.

Before long, Elya could also hear the metallic clanging. Two hard things were clashing with quite some force. Then a sharp scream.

"Is it another team fighting? I didn't intend to move in an arc, but it seems we've come across one of the other groups." With a bucket of cold water thrown over his near-giddy excitement, Elya lost his motivation and sighed. "Well, it's fine. Maybe we can fight as reinforcements."

As they continued walking toward the source of the noise, Elya began to feel something was off, that for a battle, it didn't sound right. *It's almost as if it's—*

His doubt was cleared up when they turned the corner. It was

a room big enough for dozens of people to run around inside. Inside were ten lavishly armored lizardmen. They all had collars around their necks, but the chains were severed and hung loosely.

They were swinging swords at one another. The blows were unleashed with intense screams and repelled with determined slashes. These exchanges were going on throughout the room. The scene resembled a fierce battle, but Elya saw at a glance that it was training.

The fact that they stopped the moment Elya and the others entered the room made it certain.

Also inside were one giant, with a tower shield, wearing black full plate armor that had a crimson pattern like blood vessels, and someone else—or perhaps some*thing* else was more accurate.

It was a huge magical beast with a silver coat and wise eyes.

"So you've finally come, have you, raiders?"

Magical beasts who could talk were usually trouble. Magical beasts usually just forced things with their robust physiques, but the highly intelligent ones could use magic.

Elya was sure of himself as a genius swordsman, but he wasn't so great with magic. Flexing his core and steeling his mind, he prepared to resist his opponent's spells and asked, "Who are you?"

He probably didn't need to. As long as it was waiting for them, it had to be one of the tomb's defenders. The question was: Where in the hierarchy?

From the beast's appearance, it was possible that it was the master of the tomb. If that was the case, slaying it would be meritorious service of the first rank. It would make his team the most outstanding one on the job. Tenbu was Elya's team and his alone.

That would mean he was the best of all the workers there. Luck was an important part of being a worker.

"I was told to act as your opponent, that I was. We were supposed to test several things, that we were, but…you're no match for me, no, you're not."

Disappointment and irritation assailed him at once. The former was due to the fact that this monster was only a watchman. The latter was due to being taken lightly.

"You're gonna say that without even fighting me? Hey!"

"S-sir!"

The elf he'd called for in a low voice jumped. The sight of it was immensely satisfying. *That* was the proper attitude for addressing him. His mind was soothed after the irritation of spending so much time cohabitating with Momon, whom everyone looked up to.

"What kind of magical beast is that?"

"I-I-I'm sorry. I-I'm not familiar with it."

"Tch! Useless."

He struck the useless elf with the hilt of his sword.

She fell to the floor and, covering her face, issued a stream of apologies, but he ignored her and examined the magical beast's build.

It was so big that attacking it head-on didn't seem like it would be advantageous, but that's how most magical beasts were, and he'd killed plenty of them. It was ridiculous to be scared of it just because it was a type he didn't know.

Caution was necessary, but going past cautious to scared was

the height of incompetence.

“Let me ask you something. Do you have any reason for believing you can win against me?”

“You look so weak, that you do…”

Elya scowled and he gripped his sword harder. “Well, it seems like you’ve got knotholes for eyes. Shall I gouge them out for you?”

“Please do not, that I ask. Now then, my orders say it’s all right for me to kill you, that they do, so…let’s start this fight, shall we?”

Its tone was carefree. That further irritated Elya.

He wanted to just attack without saying anything more, but swinging his sword at the magical beast while it was so composed would make him feel inferior. So he held himself back and scoffed. “Yes, let’s—beast.”

“By the way, I wonder what you’re doing, that I do. Those elves need to prepare, do they not?”

“I don’t need them. More importantly, those lizards behind you…”

“Yes, no need to worry about them, no, there isn’t. They are only here to watch us, that they are. Pay no attention to them, that I say.”

“Giving up your sole chance at victory? You’re a brave one.”

“I’m glad for your praise, that I am.”

So it doesn’t understand sarcasm. It understands words, but I guess it’s not that smart? Elya was thinking, when the beast spoke again, wiggling its whiskers.

“Even so, I’ll mercilessly kill you, that I will, so come at me with your full strength, that I wish. As I said earlier, this is a test for me, that it is…”

“A test? As a gatekeeper?”

“Not quite, no. A test of whether I’ve progressed as a warrior or not, that it is. Now then, it’s about time for me to attack, that it is. For the moment I will not fight the elves behind you, no, I won’t, only you.”

“As you wish. Have at me.”

“I am Hamusuke! Remember the name of the one who killed you and go to the next world, that I say. Give me your name as well, that you should!”

“…I have no name a beast needs to know.”

“Then I will strike you from my memory as a fool with no name, that I will!”

The huge monster charged all at once.

It was incredibly nimble for its size. A lesser warrior would have been overwhelmed by the pressure bearing down on him and been unable to avoid serious injury from the beast’s body check.

But I’m not like those twerps.

Elya drew Hamusuke’s charge to the last moment and then slid to the side without moving his feet.

This was the effect of an improved version of the martial art Contracting Earth, Contracting Earth Revised.

Contracting Earth was usually only used to close a gap between oneself and one’s opponent, but it could shift the user in

any direction. It looked rather strange to change position without moving one's feet, but it was very practical.

Evading with a large movement always resulted in instability. Without that loss of balance, however, it was possible to flow directly into an attack and put one's weight into it.

"Yaargh!"

He brought his sword down and—

"Guhblergh!"

Hamusuke bounced into him and he went flying.

Its body felt unbelievably hard.

The soft-looking silver pelt was actually as solid as metal. From Elya's point of view, he'd been hit with a wrecking ball. His consciousness even whited out for a split second.

The moment he hit the floor, he confirmed, practically by instinct, that he could still move all his parts.

He had bruises, but nothing was broken. He was still plenty able to fight.

His mind was nearly overrun by rage that he was lying on the ground and had shamefully taken his opponent's hit, but the warrior in him scolded himself; now wasn't the time to think those things.

As he stood up, he simultaneously took note of Hamusuke's position and pointed his sword to meet the beast's charge.

Something slimy ran from his nose. He wiped it away with a hand, and as expected, it was blood.

"You vile bitch…"

Hamusuke watched, unmoving, in silence as Elya got to his feet. Perhaps *observed* is the best word.

They were not the eyes of a beast wondering, *Can I eat this? Can I defeat it?* but the eyes of a warrior trying to judge how best to fight based on their brief exchange of blows.

I'm the test to see if this beast can develop into a warrior? Me?!

It wasn't pleasant, but he had to acknowledge that her movements were not those of a mere animal. The previous attack had been a leaping body check upon seeing that he had gotten around her flank. She wasn't terribly powerful, but the fact that she had been able to respond to the situation had to be due to training.

"I see, that I do… If I keep chipping away at you, I can win with ease, that I can. Oh, but don't feel bad, no, you should not. I have never met a human who could defeat me, no, I haven't."

"Try saying that after you get a load of this! Unlike beasts, warriors have martial arts!"

He had thought he could win with energy to spare, so he hadn't used them, but he no longer had that leeway.

"Martial arts: Ability Boost! Greater Ability Boost!"

He was proud of these arts, especially Greater Ability Boost; it usually couldn't be acquired by someone of Elya's level.

The fact that I could get it proves I'm a prodigy! I really am strong!

He swung his sword. His body felt light; his movements were smooth. His sword moved as if tracing a perfect image.

He smirked. *Now it's my turn.*

“Hmm. You’re supposed to take some distance when unsure of your opponent’s strength, that you are…but…as a warrior I must fight, that I must! It can’t be helped, no, it cannot!” Hamusuke closed in walking on two feet. “A close-quarters fight, that it is! Can you handle it? That I ask!”

“Don’t underestimate me, beast.”

As soon as she was in range, he slashed.

At the last moment, Hamusuke used her claws to parry the attack Elya unleashed with his boosted body. Or more accurately, she tried to—because the sword slipped into her foreleg. But it had lost a lot of momentum, so it couldn’t rip into her tough pelt or cut the meat beneath.

Without bringing his katana back, he lunged at Hamusuke’s eyes. Some monsters could repel shabby swords with the protective film over their eyes, and some warriors could repel an amateur’s sword with chi or an aura. But Hamusuke didn’t seem to have any defensive powers like that.

For precisely that reason, Hamusuke couldn’t allow him that attack.

At the same time she spun out of the thrusting blade’s way, her tail went flying at Elya.

He blocked it with his sword. The surprisingly intense impact turned to numbness that spread up his arm. “Kgh!” He could see Hamusuke spinning around once more. In other words, that impact was on its way again.

Elya jumped out of the way. He already had a pretty good idea of how long her tail was. Once it passed him, he could use Contracting Earth Revised to charge.

Just as he thought the tail was about to pass, it abruptly

stopped.

"Urk!"

It had been a feint. In the interlude, Hamusuke had taken a different stance and withdrawn her tail at the same time. Having lost the chance to leap at her, Elya grimaced.

Her tail moved in a completely different way from her body. It was less like a mouse's tail and more like the snake tail of a khimaira; it moved independently.

"So your tail can move on its own?" Overwriting the data in his mind about this magical beast, Hamusuke, Elya leaped at her.

Hamusuke, who had been waiting, intercepted.

Katana crossed claw. The one whose blood sprayed was Elya.

Hamusuke could attack with both paws, while Elya had only one sword, so she had the greater number of strikes.

He was at a disadvantage at close quarters.

He had boosted his physical abilities, but Hamusuke still outclassed him. *In that case—*

He used Contracting Earth Revised to retreat in one motion.

"Hmm. Hmm, I say."

Elya took the time before she came after him to raise his sword overhead and bring it down again. "Air Slash!" His slash ripped through the air and raced toward Hamusuke.

She'd hidden her face, and the attack hit her pelt.

The farther it had to fly, the less damage it dealt. It would be difficult to land a fatal blow with it, but—

“Seems like you can’t block *that*, can you? So there’s the gap between humans and beasts.”

“Hmm, this is trouble…that it is.”

He used Air Slash a few times in succession. Her pelt was tough. It would be hard to break through it. That’s why he aimed at the part of her that seemed least defended—her face.

Hamusuke, pinned, didn’t budge from where she stood. She just covered her face and talked through a small gap. “Wait, that I ask—”

“Are you begging for your life? You really are just a beast after all.”

“No, it—! Don’t bother me, that I say! It’s this thing in my mouth—ah, never mind, no, do not!”

He had no idea what she was talking about.

Well, humans can’t expect to understand a beast’s ramblings… Still, seems like she’s about to charge!

“Ahhh, you’re so annoying, that you really are! Here I come, that I do!”

“C’mon!”

Since Hamusuke didn’t have a method of attacking from a distance, her options were limited. She would probably try to force her way near him. That’s exactly what Elya was hoping for.

It would be hard to finish her with Air Slash, so he didn’t have any way to defeat her except with something more direct. When she ran at him, she would run with her beastly face thrust toward him. He would stop her in her tracks by using a martial art stronger than Air Slash. Then, if he kept pummeling her face at close range, he was sure to win.

Confident in his victory, Elya's face twisted into a brutal smile, but just then Hamusuke's tail made a slithering motion.

And then—

"Ugyaaaa!"

The tail, flexible like a whip, struck his shoulder with impossible speed.

The armor over his shoulder shrieked as it dented and crushed his flesh. At the same time, the snapping of his bones reverberated inside his body, and a lightning bolt of pain shot toward his brain.

It was so intense viscous drool dribbled from his mouth as he beat a staggering retreat.

Behind Hamusuke, her tail was weaving around like a snake. It was bizarrely long.

"As I thought, my tail is too strong, that it is. I wanted to finish this at close quarters for that reason, that I did."

This is bad.

Elya bit back a scream.

If she charged at him while he was in this state, he would lose.

"Y-you guys! What're you doing standing around like that?! Cast something! Healing! Heal me! Hurry up and cast healing on me, slaves!"

At their master's order, one of the elves rushed to begin casting a spell.

The pain in his shoulder drained away until it was gone.

“You’re not done yet! Support magic!”

Not only did they boost his physical abilities, his sword was temporarily enchanted, his skin was hardened, his senses were sharpened… Hamusuke looked on as innumerable support spells were cast.

As the many spells took effect on Elya, a sneer appeared on his face once more.

A vast amount of energy coursed through his body.

He’d never lost with this many magic boosts, no matter how immensely powerful his opponent had been.

His sword whooshed as he swung it, moving much faster than usual. Like this, he was confident he could fight with Hamusuke on equal or better footing.

“There’s a basic difference in physical ability between humans and magical beasts, you know! Now I’ve filled the gap!”

“I intended to take all of you at once in the first place, so I don’t mind at all, no, I don’t. Or rather, I too hope this fight will finally get good, that I do.”

“Keep talking!”

Elya rushed forward. *I’m going to crush her all at once with this energy filling me up!* He wasn’t going to let her give him lip any longer. As he used Contracting Earth Revised, he unleashed Air Slash as a diversion.

“Take this!”

At the same time as his shout, he brought his sword down with all his might. If her pelt was tough, he would just have to hit her harder than it could handle.

The blade he'd swung with his full power…

"Slash, that I use!"

A sharpness from above struck down on his arms.

Something went spinning through the air and crashed to the floor. A metallic *clank* and a sound like a wet sack dropping echoed out.

Elya couldn't understand why the two arms that had been holding his sword up until a moment ago had vanished—even though the sprays of blood from their stumps pulsed in time with his heartbeat.

The excruciating pain… His arms, still gripping his sword, on the floor at some distance from him…

Seeing these truths, Elya finally began to grasp reality.

As he staggered away from Hamusuke, he screamed in a shaking voice, "My arrrrrrms! H-h-heal me! Hurry up!"

The elves didn't move.

In their dull eyes was the dark happiness of those who had been treated cruelly.

"Okay! Success, that it is! I used a martial art, that I did! Now my master will praise me, that he will!"

"Eegh!" Elya emitted a hoarse shriek.

In this world dominated by creatures stronger than humans, adventuring meant living next door to pain.

He had experienced all sorts in his life. He had broken bones, been struck by lightning, burned with fire, frozen with chill, bitten, cut, smashed. Still, he'd never dropped his weapon. Perhaps

that was only natural in a world where losing one's grip on one's weapon led to death. He had been confident that as long as he had his katana, he could make it out of any situation.

But now that confidence was shattered.

This shock he was experiencing for the first time.

"My arms! Now!"

His blood sprayed and a cold heaviness began to spread from the cut edges.

In response to Elya's thunderous shouts, the elves just grinned.

Elya had no idea what to call the emotions flooding his heart.

Hamusuke addressed him in a way that could be termed gentle. "I thank you, that I do! I'm not fond of causing suffering, so I'll end this now, that I will."

Something whooshed through the air.

A moment later something hit his face. A pain great enough to make him forget about his severed arms coursed through him, and he sensed everything coming apart.

That was the last pain Elya felt.

The corpse with its face half-crushed in fell heavily to the floor.

Hamusuke nodded and withdrew. If she was nearby, the elves probably couldn't approach the man. They seemed like casters, but maybe one of them would pick up his sword and challenge her. She didn't want to get in the way of that.

"Now then, would you all also like to—?"

Having taken some distance, Hamusuke looked up and faltered. The elves were laughing and kicking the corpse of the warrior who should have been their friend.

"What's this? That I ask! An elven burial rite, is it?" she asked but felt it had to be something else. A tinge of joy had appeared in their leaden eyes. They had to be venting their hatred.

"...Well, I don't know what to do now, no, I don't."

Use all the skills you've learned so far on the raiders. Show me the fruits of your training. That's what she'd been told, and that's how she'd been fighting. But would attacking elves who weren't even hostile still count as putting her training on display? She at least wanted them to oppose her.

"I've heard provocation is effective, that I have...but what to say? That I wonder. I don't know, no, I don't. That's no helping it, no, there is not. I'll wait for word from my master, that I will. Oh, but—" She turned to the one who was grading her fight. "Master Zaryusu, how did I do? That I ask! A passing grade, is it?"

"Yes. Magnificent. You definitely used a martial art."

The lizardman teaching her the ways of the warrior nodded, and Hamusuke broke into a smile.

"I'm so happy, that I am. Next I will learn how to wear armor, will I?"

"Yeah, that'll be next. We'll start with lighter gear and gradually increase the weight."

Hamusuke wasn't able to wear armor, mainly because she just felt so weird when she put it on that she couldn't move how she wanted. She didn't have any trouble running around and changing position under normal conditions, but in battle when she tried to wield her tail, she lost her balance and missed her target.

That's why she was learning by watching her lizardman instructor's example.

"Now I can show my master how much stronger I've gotten for him, that I can! I wonder when I'll be able to call myself a proper warrior, that I do! Warrior Hamusuke, that I am!"

"Hmm… I'd guess in another month or two you'll be able to call yourself a warrior."

"…That's so far away, that it is."

"Seems pretty quick to me, Hamusuke. Usually it takes a year before you can finally use a martial art! When you think of it that way, it's so soon." Zenbel, another lizardman standing next to Zaryusu, chimed in.

"You think so, do you?"

"Yes, that I do. Real battle training and healing wounds, using support magic to battle someone stronger than you… You've been through some hellish training, but you're still learning really fast."

Hamusuke shuddered, as did the lizardmen. The thought of all the training they'd done was chilling.

"I'd be happy if we could train in ways that didn't make me think of the word *death*, that I would…"

"I think fighting right on the edge of living and dying will make you stronger, but… Well, to each his own. Plus, it'd be tragic for a newlywed to die during a workout."

"Oh, that's right, you got married, that you did!"

"Yeah. She got pregnant, so…"

"Just the aim I'd expect from an exceptional warrior like you.

You did it like what, two or three times?”

Zaryusu stuck his fist into Zenbel. “That’s enough. We have to get back to our exercises. What should we do about those elves?”

“Eh, we can just leave them, that I think.”

One by one the elves who had been punching and kicking their dead owner this whole time plunked down on the floor like something had finally snapped inside them. Hamusuke didn’t sense any will to fight, so she decided that unless she received word from her master or they tried to run away, she would just leave them alone.

Intermission

At the sudden change in airflow just past the tip of his snout, the Platinum Dragonlord, Zeyndelux Vaishion, awoke from his light slumber.

Surprise was the emotion that occupied his awakened mind, or one could just as easily call it *shock*.

A dragon's keen perception far surpassed that of a human's. Even if someone was invisible or disguised with an illusion, a dragon could immediately sense their presence from a surprisingly long distance—even while asleep.

And an ordinary dragon's faculties could not even compare with his; he was a dragonlord. For someone to approach this near to him meant their abilities had to be unparalleled.

Even he, in all his long life, had only met a handful of people at that level. The first was a dragonlord like him. The second was no longer of this world: Ijaniya, an assassin and one of the Thirteen Heroes. And then—

Sensing the presence of the one who came to mind next, Zeyndelux—Zey—frowned as he slowly opened his eyes.

Dragon eyes could see in the dark as if it were midday.

Standing grandly in the direction from which he felt the presence was an old woman with an elegant sword at her hip. A smile reserved for someone who'd pulled off the innocent prank of getting this far without being detected by the dragon's keen senses was spread across her wrinkled face.

"Long time no see."

Zey eyed the old woman without responding.

Her hair, gone completely white, indicated what a long time she'd been alive. But something about her face was lively, like a mischievous child's.

Old age had made her thin and frail, but inside she was still the same.

As Zey was comparing her to the image of her in his mind, her eyebrows suddenly tilted to a dangerous angle.

"What? Has my friend forgotten how to say hello? Good grief, do dragons go senile, too?"

Zey bared his fangs and chuckled kindly. "Sorry. I was overcome with emotion at meeting my old friend. I couldn't get the words out." His voice was far gentler than one would imagine, given his size.

The old woman's response was sarcastic as he expected. "Friend, hmm? My friend was inside that empty suit of armor… It looks pretty beat up."

When Zey had adventured with the old woman and her friends, he'd been manipulating a hollow suit of armor from afar. When he revealed the truth, she was furious that he'd tricked her. She still held a grudge about it and needled him now and then to this day.

He thought it was about time for her to forgive and forget, but at the same time, he enjoyed their familiar banter.

Grinning at the same old back-and-forth, he looked at her fingers. "Hmm? Seems like the ring is missing. What happened to it? I don't think there's anyone capable of stealing it from you… but that item contains power beyond the realm of human capability. I don't want it to fall into the wrong hands. I especially wouldn't want the Slane Theocracy's Black Scripture to get it…"

“Are you trying to change the subject? But good eye. I guess that’s a dragon’s perceptiveness when it comes to treasure, hmm? Well, it’s fine… I gave it to a youngster. Rest easy.”

This wasn’t the kind of item one could give away lightly.

It had been created with wild magic. These days magic was tainted and warped, so it would be nearly impossible to produce a similar item. As one of the few stewards of wild magic left, he wanted to ask where the ring was.

But he trusted his friend.

“I see. Well, if it’s what you decided, then it’s probably all right… By the way, I heard the rumors. You’ve been adventuring? Is that why you’re here?”

“Certainly not! I just came to visit as a friend. Besides, I retired from adventuring. Don’t make this old lady work anymore. I passed my role on to the crybaby.”

“The crybaby?” Zey pondered who it could be for a moment, and then it hit him. “You mean…her?”

The old lady grinned when she realized who he meant from the hint of emotion in his voice. “Yes, the little Imbern girl.”

“Ahh.” He was astonished. “You’re probably the only one who can get away with calling her that.”

“You think so? I’m sure you could even more than me. After all, she and I are about the same age. You’re older, right?”

“Well, yes, but… Still, I can’t believe she agreed to be an adventurer! How did you get her to do it?”

“Ha. She was whining, so I told her if I beat her she had to do whatever I said. Then I socked it to her!” She cackled as if amused to her very core.

"…You're about the only human who can defeat her." Zey spoke in a voice that in a human would have indicated a cold sweat and shook his head. He was recalling the face of another old comrade, one with whom he'd fought against the evil spirits; she had performed particularly well in the battle against the bug spirits.

"Well, my friends helped. Plus, knowing undead means knowing how to defeat them. Even if she can't win with her abilities, she can turn the tables. Still, the crybaby may be strong, but there's always someone stronger. You, for instance, could probably defeat her pretty easily. If you weren't restrained, you'd be the most powerful being in the world."

The old woman shifted her eyes to the silver suit of armor. She'd probably expected a lighthearted response, but Zey's was more heavy.

"Oh, I don't know. The power that sullies the world might be stirring again."

There was a hole in the right shoulder of the armor like a spear had pierced it.

"So the aftershock from a hundred years ago has come? This time it won't be someone on the world's side, like our leader?"

"It's possible it was just an unlucky encounter, but the true nature of that vampire has to be right alongside evil. Still, I thought it seemed like the time had come, but I can't decide if suddenly running into it was bad luck, or if we are lucky for having confirmed its existence."

"Two sides of the same coin. You can choose whichever you like. So I asked you once before, but you can't enlist the other dragonlords to help?"

"The answer is the same. Probably not. The only ones still alive

in this world are ones who didn't fight in the battle with the Eight Kings of Avarice. I highly doubt guys like the Heavenly Dragonlord, just flying around all the time, or the Deep Darkness Dragonlord, holed up in his huge underground cave doing who knows what, would lend me their strength."

"Yeah. But there are ones like the Brightness Dragonlord who had children with humans. If you tried talking to them, something might work out."

"Maybe…but I don't know. Personally I think asking for *her* cooperation is our best bet—the one he told us about who is sleeping on the deepest level of the city in the sea."

"Waiting in her dreams, was it? If our leader had been able to leave behind all his knowledge, we would probably have less trouble. He really died too soon."

"There was nothing we could have done. Even he…I think it was a shock to kill the player he'd come this far with. I can understand refusing revival. You were shocked, too, weren't you, Ligritte?"

The old woman got a faraway look in her eyes and sadly nodded her head. "Well…yeah. Actually…yeah."

"Ligritte, I'm sorry because I know you've quit being an adventurer and all, but can I ask a favor of you?"

"What might that be? I have an idea, but let's hear it."

Zey was looking at a sword. Its shape wasn't conducive to slashing, but its edge was peerlessly sharp; nothing anywhere close could be made with current magic.

That sword—one of the Eight Weapons left behind by the Eight Kings of Avarice—was the reason Zey couldn't leave this place.

“It’s something I’ve been doing up till now, but I want you to help me. I want you to collect information about that sword, an item on par with a Guild Weapon, as well as other special *Yggdrasil* items, like the Reinforcing Armor the kingdom adamantite-rank adventurer team Drops of Red possesses…”



Chapter 4 A Handful of Hope

CHAPTER 4
A Handful Of Hope

1

This is what a dam bursting is like. The flood of attacks was enough to make Hekkeran think that.

Yes, the opponents were low-tier undead. They weren't so terrible to the members of Foresight. But there were no breaks between the wavelike attacks.

After finally defeating two ghasts in the tenth battle since the series had started, he wiped the sweat off his face.

His body wanted a rest, but there was no time for that. He took a sip of water from the leather pouch at his hip and worked to catch his breath as he gave instructions to retreat. As he might have guessed, however, the enemy wasn't about to allow that.

A combined party of three skeleton warriors with round shields and two robed skeleton mages with staves made its entrance. They leaped out into the party's way.

"Save your magic!"

"I know!"

"Yeah, I got it!"

Since they had no idea what was coming up ahead, they couldn't use magic willy-nilly—its outstanding effectiveness had to be saved as a last resort. That's why they'd been conserving as much as possible so far.

Still, they'd ended up relying on an ability with a limited num-

ber of uses per day and almost used it up. That was just how many various traps and diverse types of undead had gotten in their way.

Skeleton archers had been shooting at them from behind a barred door where their swords wouldn't reach. The monsters were tough because with their resistance to stabbing damage, Foresight's arrows couldn't do lethal damage, but Roberdyck exorcised them.

Roberdyck also destroyed the undead throwing bottles of poison with exorcism.

Then there was the joint attack by the floor imitator, which mimicked the floor and used a sticky liquid to trap anyone who stepped on it, and flying undead—also thwarted with Roberdyck's exorcism.

Roberdyck also exterminated a mob of mixed undead that inflicted all manner of negative statuses—Sickness, Poison, Curse—with exorcism.

Now he only had a couple of uses left, but they had managed to conserve their other spells and abilities. The only tough fight they'd had was when flesh golems—which looked just like zombies—were mixed in with a group of zombies.

"Careful! Multiple sets of footsteps from the rear!"

"Undead detected! Six of them!"

Imina's voice, and then Roberdyck's a moment later, caused everyone to tense up. The reason the five skeletons in front of them hadn't begun fighting was probably to wait and annihilate them in one fell swoop with a pincer attack.

Hekkeran considered what their next move should be.

A list of several tactics sprang immediately to mind. *Make a preemptive strike on the enemies in front, wiping them out all at once. Ignore the enemies dawdling up ahead and turn to bash the ones to the rear. Stop for a moment and determine which group is stronger, then crush the weaker ones first. Use magic to detain one side and use that time to beat up the other.*

They were all effective, but they all lacked a decisive something. But at that moment, the oracle of intuition descended to him.

"Hekkeran! What should we do?"

"Go back! I think there was a side path! Go down that!"

The second he told her, Imina, bringing up the rear, raced away. Arché and Roberdyck followed. A moment later, Hekkeran did, too.

Imina must have followed the order and run because the distance was feasible. Hekkeran desperately sprinted in order to keep up with the others, who were moving as fast as they could. Naturally, their opponents weren't about to let them get away, and he could hear the undead footsteps coming after them.

"Eat this!"

Hekkeran took out a sticky alchemical solution and tossed it behind him.

The solution spread slickly across the floor.

Its effects were immediate, and the sound of footsteps vanished.

Intelligent undead might have thought to go around, but there was no way low-tier undead had those kinds of smarts. And he figured that once monsters like skeletons, with no muscular

strength, were stuck, it would be difficult for them to rip themselves free.

"Undead detected! Four coming from the right!"

"That's a wall!"

"No, it's an illusion!"

Four ghouls descended on them through the wall. The bony, thin undead, lunging with their long, yellow, clawlike fingernails, were terrifying. That said, no one on this team was such a baby as to shake in their boots at this level of horror.

"Don't underestimate us!"

Though taken by surprise, Imina drew her dagger immediately and stuck it into a ghoul's neck. A foul liquid that must have been blood glugged out, and one ghoul crumpled to the floor. Roberdyck, next to Imina, had bashed in the head of another with a mighty swing of his mace.

Hekkeran concluded he could leave that up to those two and turned to see what was happening behind them. The undead were definitely giving chase. *So maybe it's safest to spread around some more alchemical solution?*

Just as he was about to throw it, he spotted a horrifying monster.

"Elder lich!"

At the same time, he noticed the thunderbolt at the elite caster's fingertips. Even Hekkeran knew what spell that was.

Lightning. Its effect was a bolt of electricity that pierced in a straight line. There was only one way to evade it.

"Shove the ghouls back!"

Imina and Roberdyck probably had no idea why Hekkeran was ordering them to do that. But they both obeyed without hesitation.

The white lightning flashed past in the hallway behind them just as they piled in past the illusion wall, ghouls and all.

As the air popped and quivered with electricity, a magic circle appeared beneath Hekkeran and his team's feet. The next moment, they were enveloped in an inescapable pale-blue light, and the scene before their eyes abruptly changed.

"Everyone look sharp! On your guard! …Huh?"

Although the ghouls were gone and their surroundings had changed, their nerves, tensed from repeated battles, hadn't relaxed. Still, under conditions so strange, he couldn't be blamed for emitting a dazed murmur.

Hekkeran shook his head and regained focus. The first thing he needed to do—although getting a handle on their situation was up there—was check the status of his teammates.

Imina, Arché, Roberdyck.

The members of Foresight were all in the exact same battle formation as when they'd entered the magic circle—no one was missing.

After confirming one another's safety, they remained vigilant and took in their surroundings.

They were in a dimly lit corridor. It was wide and tall—big enough for a giant to walk down. The torches mounted on the wall, with their flickering flames, created shadows that moved as though they were dancing. At the end of the hall was a huge barred gate. White magic light came through the gaps.

In the opposite direction, the corridor seemed to stretch on for

quite a distance, and they could see by the light of the torches that there were a number of doors along the way.

Overall, it was quiet; the only sound was the crackling of the torches.

For the moment, there didn't seem to be any monsters threatening to attack. Despite that conclusion, they couldn't relax.

"I don't know where we are, but the atmosphere is totally different from what we've seen up until now."

Certainly the feel of this place was completely different from that of the earlier tomb. It seemed more civilized somehow. As the Foresight crew looked around, trying to figure out where they were, only Arché's behavior differed.

"This is…"

Keenly picking up on the emotion in her words, Hekkeran asked, "Do you know it? Or do you have an idea?"

"I know of a place that is similar: the empire's arena."

"Ah, now that you mention it, yes." Roberdyck voiced his agreement.

Hekkeran and Imina didn't say anything, but they also agreed. This corridor definitely looked like the one they'd taken from the waiting room to the arena when they'd fought there.

"So there must be an arena over there." Roberdyck pointed at the barred gate.

"Probably. And since we got teleported here, it must mean…" *Enter the arena*. Not that he had any idea what was waiting for them there.

"We're in danger. Long-distance teleportation is said to be

tier-five magic. A caster so powerful they can set a trap using magic at that level? I've only heard of people like that in fairy tales. Someone with unbelievable magic skills created these ruins. We shouldn't accept their invitation. I suggest we go in the opposite direction."

"But if they're inviting us, couldn't we try talking to them? I mean, if we disobey, won't they just get mad and think, *Screw these guys*?"

"Both ways are dangerous. What do you think, Roberdyck?"

"I agree with both of you, but I do wonder about something Arché said. Did the one inhabiting this tomb really lay the trap? Perhaps he's simply making good use of something a third party he never met created."

They all looked at one another and sighed. Standing here debating wouldn't get them anywhere. They didn't have enough information, and they weren't agreeing, but they had to come up with a conclusion.

"Rober is right. These ruins might be five hundred years old!"

"Yeah. Supposedly magic was more advanced back then."

"You mean the country that conquered the continent but fell almost immediately and only its capital remains? That story?"

"The Eight Kings of Avarice… They're the ones said to have spread magic throughout the world. If these ruins are from that era…"

"…I see. Then I vote we enter the arena. If he sent us here with a trap, he probably wouldn't let us get away anyhow."

At these remarks from Roberdyck, the other three nodded, resolute, and the party set off.

When they approached the barred gate, it lifted swiftly, as if it had been waiting for them. When they passed through it, the scene greeting them was a large open space surrounded by multiple levels of spectator seating.

This arena was no less impressive than the empire's. In fact, the architecture might have been superior, and the whole area was illuminated with white Continual Light. They could see everything as if it were midday.

Their surprise peaked when they saw the spectator seating.

Innumerable lumps of dirt—figures called golems—were sitting there.

Golems were inorganic life-forms created via magic who faithfully took and carried out orders from their master. Since they didn't need food or sleep, didn't get tired, and didn't age, they were extremely useful as gatekeepers, guards, and laborers. Even weak ones fetched quite a price because of how much time, effort, and money went into making them.

Hekkeran and his team charged quite a lot for their services, but even they would have trouble affording one.

Golems were that expensive, and yet this arena was practically overflowing with them.

Hekkeran took it as a sign of how wealthy the owner of the place was, as well as how lonely.

The group exchanged glances, as they had a number of times since being transported to this place, and advanced into the center of the silent arena.

"We're outside?"

In response to Imina's voice, the others looked up. What they saw was the night sky. The lights in the area were so bright they

couldn't make out the stars, but it was still undoubtedly the sky.

"So we got teleported outside?"

"Then if we use Fly we can es—!"

"Yaaa!"

With a shout that interrupted Arché, a figure jumped from a terrace that must have been VIP seating.

That was the equivalent of six stories up, but the figure flipped in midair and made a featherlight landing. It wasn't due to magic but was simply great physical technique. It was such a perfectly executed movement that even the thief Imina gasped.

Having absorbed the full shock of the landing by just bending its legs, the figure flashed a proud grin.

It was a dark elf boy who had jumped down. His long ears, poking out from his silky golden hair, twitched, and a smile, radiant like the sun, spread across his face.

He wore fitted, dark-red dragon scale light armor, top and bottom, over a layer of basic leather protective gear. On top of that he sported a white vest with golden threading, featuring some kind of crest on the chest.

Imina yelped when she saw that the color of his eyes didn't match. "Y—"

"And our challengers have enterrrrred!"

He spoke into some kind of rod he was holding, and his voice, which hadn't changed yet, was amplified to multiple times its natural volume and echoed.

A thunderous pounding noise shook the arena.

When the workers looked around, the golems, who hadn't budged until now, were all stomping their feet.

"The challengers are four fearless fools who have invaded the Great Tomb of Nazarick! Facing them is the ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, the most supreme of supremes, Lord Ainz Ooal Gown!"

The barred gate on the opposite side rose. The one who emerged from the dimly lit corridor was, in a word, a skeleton.

The vacant eye sockets of his bleached white skull glowed with red flames.

His clothing was gown-like with a cord around his waist; he was unbelievably thin since his body had no flesh. The reason he wasn't carrying any weapons must have been that he was a caster.

"What's this? His second is the captain of us guardians, Albedo!"

All the members of Foresight gasped when they saw the woman who followed behind the skeleton.

Hers was a beauty which surpassed even Raven Black's Beautiful Princess. If she seemed too gorgeous to be human, it was true—horns curled forward from either side of her head and black wings sprouted from her hips. They seemed too real to be fake.

With the pair's entrance, the arena-shaking foot stomping changed to clapping. It was a display of joy appropriate for welcoming a king.

Bathed in the thunder of the golems' unending applause, the pair moved step-by-step toward Foresight.

"I'm sorry," whispered Arché. "This is all my fault."

The battle that was about to begin would probably be the most

intense the team had ever faced—so intense someone could die. She must have been convinced that she'd driven them into it, that if her situation wasn't what it was, they might not have taken this job and come to this tomb so underinformed.

But—

"No, no, what are you talking about, little lady?"

"Yeah. We all decided to take this job together. It's not your fault. Even if we didn't know about your situation, we probably would have taken it, you know."

"Yep. So don't worry about it."

Hekkeran and Roberdyck smiled at her, and then Imina ruffled her hair.

"Okay, I imagine it's impossible, but how about we try talking to them first? Arché, do you know what kind of undead that is?"

"I sense it's intelligent, so probably some kind of elite skeleton?"

The bony figure in the lead waved his hand as if he were shooing something away.

Sound vanished. The golems stopped moving at once, and a silence so deep it hurt their ears descended on the arena.

Hekkeran turned to Ainz, who was steadily approaching them, and bowed with sincere politeness. "First, allow us to apologize, Sir Ainz Ooal…"

"…Ainz Ooal Gown."

"Excuse me—Sir Ainz Ooal Gown."

Ainz halted and gestured with his chin as if he was waiting for

him to continue.

“We’re sorry for entering your tomb without permission. If you’ll forgive us, we’d like to pay whatever sum is appropriate as reparations.”

It was silent for a time. Then Ainz emitted a sigh. Of course, as an undead, he didn’t need to breathe. Surely, he’d done it to convey his attitude.

“If you find maggots in some food you had sitting in your house, are you guys the type to take them outside and release them instead of killing them?”

“Humans are different from maggots!”

“No, they’re not. Not to me. Actually, humans might be worse. I don’t think the flies that spawned the maggots are so bad, but you’re different. You were brought here by force, with no urgent reason, only to appease your stupid desire for money, and raided this tomb—even though there might have been someone in it—to steal its treasures.” He laughed. “But you don’t have to worry. I’m not blaming you. That the strong should take from the weak is only natural. I do it, too, so I don’t count myself as an exception. It’s precisely because I’d be robbed if someone stronger came along that I’m on my guard… Anyhow, I’m chatting too much. According to the simple law that the weak are meat the strong shall eat, I’m going to take something from you.”

“But we actually do have an urgent—”

“No!” He interrupted Hekkeran in a forceful tone. “Do not offend me with your fabrications. Now, compensate for your foolishness with your lives.”

“What if we had permission?”

Ainz froze. Without a doubt, he was severely shaken. Inwardly,

Hekkeran was surprised that his casual remark had such an effect on him, but he didn't show it on his face. Just when he'd thought it was all over, a ray of hope had appeared. He had to capitalize on it.

"…Nonsense," Ainz said in a tiny voice. "That's the most absurd thing I've ever heard. A total bluff. I think you've caused me enough displeasure!"

His disturbance spread through the room, and the dark elf boy began to look puzzled. When Hekkeran eyed the last of their opponents, goose bumps rose over his entire body.

The beautiful woman behind Ainz still wore her kind smile, but she was emitting enough killing intent to draw a slick of sweat out of his forehead.

"And if it were true…?"

"…No…no…it's a bluff. Most definitely not true. You're just sacrifices wriggling in the palm of my hand." Ainz shook his head and pierced Hekkeran with his gaze. "But I…just in case, I'll ask: Who gave you permission?"

"You mean you don't know him?"

"Him…?"

"He didn't tell me his name, but he was quite a sizable monster."

"Sizable? That's…"

Hekkeran desperately tried to think what the goal of this tightrope walking should be. Ainz was obviously trapped. That's why he wasn't asking questions. If he asked, the truth or falsehood of the claim would be revealed.

He's acting just like a human, thought Hekkeran. It didn't

seem like the type of reaction a monster would have—it was cowardly. But this worked in his favor.

"Tell me, what did he look like, then?"

"...He was shiny."

"Shiny...?"

Ainz seemed caught in another whirlpool of thought, and Hekkeran breathed an internal sigh of relief that he'd escaped another dangerous juncture. He made subtle movements with his fingers to tell his teammates to look around—for an escape route. Their opponents probably wouldn't kill them until they confirmed his claims as true or false. They'd have to come up with something during that time.

"What did he say?"

We have to watch out for charm or mind control spells...

"Before I tell you, please guarantee our safety."

"What? If you really received permission from one of my friends, I promise you'll be fine. You don't have to worry about that."

A new word—friends.

Hekkeran put the information he'd gathered together in his head. What would be useful in negotiations and pulling information out of Ainz Ooal Gown was that he had friends but didn't currently have a way to contact them.

Figure out what information one's opponent is after and pretend to give it to them. That is the way of the con artist.

"...What is it? Why aren't you saying anything? Tell me what the monster you met said."

So far his tightrope walking had been a success. Then on to the next line. He wiped his sweaty hands on his pants.

"He said, 'Say hi to Ainz in the Great Tomb of Nazarick for me.'"

"…'Ainz'?"

He froze. *Did I do something wrong?* Hekkeran's expression tensed up.

"He said to say hi to Ainz, did he?"

Hekkeran braced himself. He'd already taken his chances.

"Yes."

"Kwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Ainz cackled at Hekkeran's answer. It wasn't a good-natured laugh but a throaty, fiery one.

"Haaa… Well, that makes sense. If I take a moment to think about it, your story was all over the place." Ainz didn't make a move, just fixed his eyes on Hekkeran and his team. The crimson flames in his orbits gradually changed to a dark sparkle. It was a gaze accompanied by a physical pressure, and the workers backed up a step.

The gaze contained fury.

"You, you gaaaarbage! You came in here! In the place that I! That I and my friends built! With your dirty fucking feeeeet!" Unable to rein in his wild anger, he was suddenly speechless. His shoulders heaved as if he were taking deep breaths, and then he raged on. "And on top of that! You tried to use my friends, my most precious friends! You little shiiiits! You think I can let that stand?!" he shouted violently.

His anger seemed infinite. But all of a sudden, he calmed down.

The change happened so quickly it was as if something had snapped in half. It was enough that Hekkeran and his teammates felt strange.

"—is the kind of stuff I say when I fly off the handle, but you didn't do anything so bad. You were probably just desperate and told a lie to survive. Honestly, the anger that is smoldering within me even now is just…self-centered… Albedo, Aura, and any guardians who can hear my voice, plug your ears."

The peerless beauty and the dark elf boy both plugged their ears. The boy stuck his fingers in, and the lady cutely covered hers. They meant to show him, *We aren't listening to what you're about to say*.

"I never liked this plan. I didn't want to invite dirty thieves to the Great Tomb of Nazarick. Still, I understood that it was the best way, so I agreed to it." Ainz shook his head in frustration. "Well, whatever. I'm done complaining. I was going to show you some mercy and kill you as warriors, but I changed my mind. I'll handle you like the dirty thieves you are." He spoke as if he was talking about something unrelated to any of them and then cast off his robe.

Beneath it, naturally, was a body consisting solely of bones. An ominous dark-red jewel floated inside his ribs. Besides that, his pants, and his greaves, he didn't have anything equipped. No, he also had a collar on. The chains, not attached to anything, hung loosely.

"Whoo!" A strange shout went up overhead.

When they looked up, a girlish figure with silver hair was leaning out of the VIP section. Hands in some kind of blue gauntlets immediately yanked her back, though.

"…What is she doing?"

“I’ll scold her later.”

The annoyed voice brought their attention back to Ainz, who now had a black blade in one hand and a black round shield in the other.

“Okay, I’m ready. Let’s get this started.”

He had put a little more distance between his feet. Now he was in a battle stance.

“Albedo, Aura, you can unplug your ears now.”

The two whose names were called replied in unison and removed their hands from their ears.

“I’m in a very bad mood. I didn’t think they’d be like this. I’m going to fight them right up to the moment before they die. The rest I’m leaving to you. Okay, let’s get started.”

Ainz may have been equipped with a sword and shield, but the first thing Hekkeran thought when he faced him was that he wasn’t a warrior or swordsman. In fact, he seemed most like a magical beast who would come at them with superior physical ability.

It stemmed from his casual way of standing, his careless stance. Basically, he seemed like an amateur. But he was an immense power, heavy, pressing in on them. His human-size build seemed to swell and weigh down on them.

The most terrifying thing about having made an enemy like that was if they attacked in a relentless chain.

“You’re not coming at me? Then here I go.”

Ainz charged at the same time he asked.

His speed was shocking, such that the distance between them

became zero in an instant.

Next, he brought his sword down from high overhead.

It was an attack that had destructive power but should have been full of holes. When someone with physical ability on another level unleashed it, however, it turned into a one-hit kill.

It's too dangerous to take this, Hekkeran concluded instantaneously, sensing the sword's rapid approach.

If he blocked it, he'd have to face that destructive power head-on. And in that case, the gap in their physical abilities would surely result in his being cut.

Then he only had one choice—

With a nasty grinding noise, the sword Ainz had swung drove into the ground.

—parry.

Normally a parry would throw one's opponent off-balance and create an opportunity to counterattack, but Ainz wasn't fazed. He resumed his earlier posture with footwork that seemed to indicate he'd known ahead of time what would happen.

Hekkeran realized he'd been wrong about something.

These weren't the movements of someone who was relying on physical ability alone but of someone who understood how warriors move.

Crap! I was underestimating him! But all I can do now is attack!

Twin swords flashed and angled toward Ainz's head. Really, when fighting a skeleton like Ainz, crushing weapons would deal more damage and give the advantage, but Hekkeran was better

with cutting weapons and wasn't terribly confident with crushing ones, actually.

What he needed to do in this battle was continue dealing damage, even a little bit at a time, not use big moves hoping for lots of damage when he wasn't sure if they would land or not.

His twin blades whipped at Ainz's head.

A normal enemy would get hit.

A first-rate enemy would get off with a scratch.

But what about a super-first-rate enemy?

"Hmph!" Ainz interrupted the swords' arcs with his shield. An ordinary person wouldn't have made it in time, but superior physical ability made it possible.

"Magic Arrow!"

"Lesser Agility!"

As the hard sounds of Hekkeran's two attacks being repelled by the shield rang out, Arché's spell became an arrow and flew at Ainz. At the same time, Roberdyck targeted Hekkeran and cast an agility-raising support spell.

"Child's play."

Ainz didn't even look at Arché. Just as her shot of light was about to hit him, it disappeared. Arché gaped in shock.

"Magic Immunity?! What kind?!"

"Hmph!"

As if in reply, Ainz struck at Hekkeran's face with his shield.

A shield blow!

The name of the well-known fundamental move flashed through Hekkeran's head. He saw it as an opportunity and readied an attack. He would aim for Ainz's torso, which he figured would be a blind spot due to the shield.

But Ainz easily deflected it with his black blade.

He read my move?!

He just barely evaded the black shield coming at him like a wall by ducking—and a kick from a greave-clad foot was approaching.

A normal kick wasn't so scary, but it had become apparent through their exchange that the attacks Ainz's muscular strength unleashed—despite the fact that he was a skeleton with no muscles—were all deadly blows. If one landed, he had to be prepared for a lethal wound.

Hekkeran hurried to roll out of the way. Without Roberdyck's magical assistance, it probably wouldn't have been possible. The kick's wind pressure ripped a few of his hairs out, sending chills up his spine.

"Over here!"

Imina shot two arrows at once. Since she had shouted, it wasn't a surprise attack, and Ainz was able to deal with them calmly.

The arrows missed their mark and flew behind him.

In the first place, Ainz was a skeleton, so arrows wouldn't work on him, so she'd been hoping he would just take them without even bothering to evade, but it seemed like things wouldn't work out that conveniently.

The heads of the fallen projectiles were smashed; they were specially made magic arrows that dealt crushing damage. Since skeletons were weak against crushing damage, if he hadn't dodged, they would have been very effective.

Still, there was nothing to be upset about. Hekkeran had been able to use the opening to get back on his feet and take some distance. The whole reason Imina had shouted was to create that opening.

Hekkeran charged to counter.

"Twin Swords Slash!"

"Hah!"

Ainz had no trouble blocking the dual slash attack with his single sword. The impact made Hekkeran's hands go numb.

Man, this guy is tough. So this is what it's like when a monster with physical ability far surpassing that of a human trains to be a warrior... I guess the reigning champion would be strong!

Fighting in range of a sword that dealt one-hit death consumed an extraordinary amount of mental energy. His brain was screaming its exhaustion, and he attempted to retreat to a more comfortable distance.

But Ainz wasn't about to let him do that.

"You think you're getting away?!"

Ainz rushed him. Obviously the one moving forward was faster than the one backpedaling.

Hekkeran was feeling cornered when he heard something whiz past the side of his head from the rear.

It was a high-speed arrow, loosed from cover. For a normal person, it would be impossible to dodge, but—perhaps they should have guessed—the arrow never reached Ainz, with his superhuman reflexes.

"Flash!"

"Lesser Strength!"

A burst of light appeared before Ainz's eyes. Flash was a spell that temporarily shrank the target's field of vision a little, regardless of resistance, but it seemed to have been useless against Ainz. He merely exhibited his annoyance.

"Don't get in my way!"

Ainz clicked his tongue as Hekkeran, with boosted agility and strength, closed in.

"Reinforcing Armor!"

"Evil Protection!"

Arché and Roberdyck fortified Hekkeran with support magic.

Ainz was busy evading, blocking, and countering Hekkeran's attacks when another arrow went flying for his face.

"…Hmph!" His posture as he moved his head slightly to dodge was appropriate as master of the tomb and becoming of a monster warrior.

Hekkeran took advantage of the support to get some distance and wipe away the sweat that had accumulated on his brow during this still short but intense fight.

He'd known it already, but Ainz Ooal Gown was strong.

A human could never hope to achieve Ainz's physical ability.

On top of that, Ainz possessed the skills to take advantage of his body. He was insightful enough to see through feints and perceptive enough to grasp the movements of every Foresight member. He had magic resistance and a magic sword and shield. He had everything a warrior could want.

There was a reason Hekkeran had been able to fight on an equal footing with such a man.

Certainly he was just barely hanging on throughout every exchange. If he tried to parry and mistook the angle of the sword, his weapon would break and he would be critically injured. If he misjudged the range and speed of a swing, even by a tiny bit, he'd be sliced in half. This luck was as if every coin he tossed came up heads—but he was also being protected.

But there was an even bigger reason he was making it through this fight.

And that was teamwork—movement as one, that was only possible between friends who had survived deadly battlefields together and could even read one another's thoughts.

The compound Foresight versus the solo Ainz Ooal Gown were having a close fight.

Hekkeran extinguished the smile that had begun to form in his cheeks.

Ainz was still unharmed. This wall was thick and high; still, it wasn't absolute.

Believing that, he swung his twin swords.

The fastest attack Hekkeran could unleash with his magically strengthened body was repelled ever so easily by the black round shield. The flying arrows were slashed in half by the black sword. All the while Arché and Roberdyck's magic continued to boost

Hekkeran.

They heard Ainz click his tongue in displeasure, and the hostility they sensed from him subsided dramatically.

Hekkeran had been thinking to do a follow-up attack but chose to catch his breath instead and backed up. No matter how much Ainz fought, he was undead, so he wouldn't get tired, but Hekkeran and his team were gradually exhausting themselves. A lengthy battle of attrition would put them at a disadvantage. It was right to rest when they could.

"Just as I thought… I seem to lack a finishing move. And I thought I understood the strength of numbers, but now that I'm outnumbered, I just feel so irritated… Why can't I take out even just one of these guys?"

When Ainz shrugged, it didn't bother Hekkeran. He knew he'd meant what he said.

That was the real power of teamwork. Hekkeran smiled as if Ainz had complimented them.

Then the peerless beauty, who had been watching in silence so far, opened her mouth to speak. "Lord Ainz. Perhaps it's time to end this jest."

"What?"

"I beg your pardon, but I find it hard to allow these most insolent thieves any more freedom. They attempted to cheat you using the Supreme Beings! Don't you think the time for mercy is over?"

"Hey, Albedo, Lord Ainz is—"

"No, Aura. Albedo's right." Ainz shook his head. "Besides, I think this is plenty. I feel like I gained a fair amount of experience in that fight."

“Indeed, you have fought admirably. Of course, I would expect nothing less from our ruler.”

“Heh-heh. Really? I’m glad. Coming from a far greater warrior like you, praise kind of gives me butterflies, even when it’s flattery.”

“It is most certainly not flattery. I believe it with all my heart.”

“I see. Then thank you. Now all I need is Cocytus’s critique and opinion on how I should train from here on out.”

Nodding a few times in satisfaction, Ainz turned back to Foresight.

Hekkeran had a bad feeling about this shift in atmosphere.

The intuition he’d sharpened in many a life-and-death battle was screaming, *Danger!*

“Okay, that’s enough fooling around with swords. Time for a new game.”

The sword and shield spilled out of Ainz’s hands. The moment they hit the ground, they disappeared.

“Huh?!”

Throwing away one’s sword—that was the act of someone admitting their defeat. But nothing in Ainz’s attitude implied surrender, and it shouldn’t have been a situation where he would have to acknowledge his loss.

This confused Hekkeran; he had no idea what Ainz was thinking. “What are you…?”

In response, Ainz smiled faintly. No, Hekkeran had the feeling he did.

The skeleton slowly spread his arms. It was a loving gesture, like the way an angel would accept believers or a mother would embrace her child.

"You don't know? Then I'll put it into words for you." Ainz sneered. "I'll play with you. Come at me, humans!"

The mood had changed.

Normally when someone abandoned their weapon, their equipment, they would become weaker. But Hekkeran felt like Ainz had grown much more powerful than before. He was assailed by an overwhelming sense of authority, as if Ainz had gotten physically larger.

A being who grows more powerful by casting his sword away?

There were only two answers he could think of. One was that Ainz was a monk and used his body as a weapon. But the way he fought before, the way he dodged, didn't seem to indicate he was used to that style of combat.

So there was one other possibility—

"—A caster?!" Arché shouted, having reached the same conclusion as Hekkeran.

Yes. Only now did they realize—that the being before them, Ainz Ooal Gown, might just be a caster.

It was only natural that it didn't occur to them sooner. Who could imagine a caster going head-to-head with Hekkeran, the strongest member of their team and a seasoned fighter?

Casters, especially arcane casters, were more physically vulnerable than warriors. If they had time to train their bodies, it was better spent honing their magic. That was why there were no

casters who could brawl on equal terms with a warrior.

That was common sense.

The one before them was a being who turned common sense on its head, but who could have known that?

Hence the pleading tone in Arché's shout: "Please deny it! Tell me it's not true!" If he confirmed that he was, it meant that he had more confidence in himself as a caster than as a warrior. What that meant goes without saying.

Using just a little magic could massively improve one's combat ability. A few fortification spells could make one dramatically stronger, like Hekkeran was right then. In that case—

"You finally figured it out? What a bunch of fools you are. But you're the mice who tramped into my—no, my friends' tomb, Nazarick, with your dirty feet! Makes sense that you wouldn't be terribly bright."

But as long as Arché was with him, Hekkeran had reason enough to deny that claim. "Arché! Is this guy a caster?"

"No! Definitely not! At least not an arcane caster!"

"Hmm? What is that supposed to mean?"

"I don't sense any magical energy coming from you!"

"Oh, you're using detection magic? Do excuse me."

Ainz spread his fingers so that Hekkeran and the others could see them. They were only bones, fitting for an undead. Each one had a ring.

"If I take this ring off, you'll understand. I lent one to one of my subordinates for a while…" As he spoke, he slipped a ring off his right hand. And then—

“Uwagh!” The sound of someone throwing up. The mostly liquid vomit splattered the floor of the arena and a sour smell wafted through the area.

“What did you do?!” Imina glared at Ainz as she ran over to Arché.

Ainz responded as though he was confused but still definitely displeased. “What’s this lady doing?! Looking someone in the face and throwing up? How rude can you be?!”

“Everybody run!” Arché screamed with tears in the corners of her eyes.

“He’s a monst— Euwaagh!”

As Arché threw up again, unable to hold herself together, the rest of the team realized why she was vomiting.

It wasn’t as if Ainz had done something. Arché was just so scared and tense—she couldn’t withstand his vast magical power.

In other words—

“We can’t win! His power is on another level! The word *monster* doesn’t even begin to describe him!” Arché sobbed. “No way, no way, no way!”

Arché shook her head back and forth like a crazy person, and Imina hugged her tightly. “Calm down! Roberdyck!”

“I’m on it! Lion’s Heart!”

Arché, recovered from her fear thanks to Roberdyck’s spell, stood with legs as unsteady as a newborn fawn’s and held up her staff.

“You should all run for it! Humans can’t win against that thing! He’s an unbeatable monster!”

"…We got it, Arché."

"We understand that very well, Arché. The moment he took off the ring, there was a flood of this intense feeling, like the world was enveloped in it. I have goose bumps."

"Yeah, saying he's quite the monster doesn't even begin to cover it."

All three of them had surpassed the limits of their caution levels. With nerves even more on edge, they fixed their eyes on Ainz. Their expression said they understood that shifting their gaze for even a moment could result in death.

"We definitely can't escape."

"The second we turn our backs to him, we die. Even looking away feels too risky."

"We need to find a way to buy time."

"…You're not charging?" Ainz languidly scratched his skull with a bony finger.

Hekkeran didn't respond to the provocation. This enemy had combat ability that far surpassed anything he'd ever encountered. There was only one thing to aim for—the moment he started casting, that is, the time a caster was most vulnerable. *On the off chance he casts silent magic, it's all over…*

Hekkeran began to muster his body's strength, as if he were a spring or a bow being drawn.

"Then I'll start. Touch of Undeath."

"What kind of spell is that? Arché!"

"I don't know! I've never heard of it!"

With a watchful eye on the black haze enveloping Ainz's right hand, the unknown magic, Hekkeran tensed his feet so he could dodge at a moment's notice. His teammates behind him seemed to be spreading out, wary of an area-of-effect attack.

Suddenly Ainz began walking toward him.

Hekkeran blinked in surprise.

His bearing was too nonchalant—full of holes. It wasn't the way a man who had just displayed the skills of a warrior should walk. Hekkeran knew it was a trap for sure, but he couldn't fathom its purpose.

Is he planning to do something with his magic? Does that spell only have an effect up close? Or is it defense?

He'd studied the most famous spells, so he was familiar with those, but since he wasn't a caster, Hekkeran couldn't figure out what Ainz was up to.

"Stay away from him!" Imina's shout reverberated, and a series of arrows went flying at Ainz.

She'd shot the three arrows using a skill, but Ainz dexterously batted them away with a bony hand.

"You're in my way." His voice was quiet and cold.

The red flames in Ainz's vacant orbits wavered, and watching his every move, Hekkeran was the only one who understood.

Just as a chill went up his spine, Ainz vanished.

Hekkeran obeyed his instinct to turn on his heel and run. He could see the surprised faces of his teammates, but he had neither the time nor the energy to explain—not when Ainz was standing behind Imina, slowly reaching out with his right hand.

Imina! She hasn't noticed! I should scream—no! The fact that he's not in a hurry might save us!

Hekkeran ran, using a martial art to boost his speed, but suddenly hesitated.

Is protecting Imina the smartest thing to do?

Compared to Arché and Roberdyck, who could use support magic, Imina wasn't all that critical in this battle.

He had no doubt it was better to drop someone who was a burden in order to ensure survival for the majority, but even so—

Shit!

He was making the wrong move as team leader. Though he understood he was essentially betraying his teammates, he didn't slow down. He was spurred on by not logic but emotion—emotion that told him, *Save Imina!*

Suddenly, an image of her in bed flitted across his mind. He smiled bitterly at himself for thinking of her smooth body in a life-and-death situation like this.

Still, the energy pumping in his legs increased.

It was the power of a man protecting his woman.

"Move!"

If Ainz hadn't hesitated upon seeing him charging over, he might not have made it in time, but before Ainz could touch Imina, he bowled her over.

A small yelp sounded as she bit back the pain, and it was obvious Ainz was trying to decide whether to prioritize the man who had appeared in front of him or the escaped woman.

“Over here, you idiot!” Hekkeran shouted and then focused on his martial arts.

The first one he activated was Limit Break. He had to pay for it, but it briefly increased the number of martial arts he could use at once. Next, something inside him hurt like it was ripping, so he used Dull Pain. Then Physical Boost and Sturdy Arm, Strong Blow followed by Twin Swords Slash.

Thus, his most powerful attack was born.

The dual blades traced their arcs.

The more acclimated to the speed of Hekkeran’s swings Ainz had become during their earlier exchanges, the more his timing would be off now, and the more difficult it would be for him to evade. Because Hekkeran had arranged things ahead of time, because getting too comfortable meant the end, this would be a lethal strike.

Ainz wouldn’t be able to react.

He’s mine!

The moment his swords should have been slicing into Ainz’s unguarded skull, the impact he felt was not that of blade against bone.

Perfect resistance to cutting damage?!

As a worker, he’d experienced this sensation on adventures before.

So he’s completely resistant to stabbing and cutting?! Is it even possible for a monster like that to exist?!

As Hekkeran rushed to withdraw, a cold sensation plastered over his forehead. It was Ainz’s hand. Its viselike grip wouldn’t let

Hekkeran escape.

"Hekkeran!"

"Imina! He's completely resistant to cutting damage!" He endured the awful pain and relayed the information he'd gained to his teammate behind him. That was when, still in Ainz's clutches, he felt himself get lifted off the ground. He lashed out with the flat of his sword, but the undead's grip showed no signs of loosening.

"No. Stabbing, cutting, or crushing—it doesn't matter. Attacks from weaklings like you can't even scratch me."

"How does that work?! What a cheater! That's so low!"

"He's lying, Imina! If that were true, he wouldn't have to fight so hard. He must have some weakness!"

"You can't fool us!"

"I'm sad that you don't believe me. I thought you understood well enough from that conversation earlier, but our close-quarters battle up until now was basically an experiment. You must have taken hope from the fact that you put up an okay fight? I'll be merciful and hope that you're able to have nice dreams even in the hell that awaits you!"

"You call that mercy? You shitty, lowlife bastard! Let Hekkeran go!"

Hekkeran heard arrows being fired in rapid succession, but Ainz seemed unfazed and the pain in his forehead remained.

"Are you sure you want to do that? You might hit him."

The horrible pain in Hekkeran's head made him scared it might just crack open. He struggled, but his opponent didn't budge. He kicked him with his steel-toed boots, but only stubbed

his toes.

“Does it hurt? Don’t worry. I won’t kill you now. This is the most pity I can take on thieves—Paralysis.”

His body froze. No, he wasn’t frozen but paralyzed.

“Maybe Touch of Undeath was a waste if I was only going to paralyze him?”

Hekkeran’s ears picked up sounds in vain.

He heard a series of bow twangs.

The response was a ridiculing voice. “How many times do I have to tell you…? No, it’s fine, you can resist. You’ll feel more helpless that way.”

Run!

His mouth wouldn’t move, but it trembled.

Even if they ran as fast as they could, this wasn’t a run-of-the-mill enemy they could escape. But fighting was even more foolish. Especially without their warrior to keep the enemy’s attacks at bay, their line would surely crumble.

“So who’s next? You could have all come at me at once, but I suppose that’s not much fun.”

Imina gazed at Hekkeran, who was lying on the floor.

He wasn’t dead, but he might as well have been. She couldn’t think of a way to save him from this incomprehensible monster, Ainz Ooal Gown. Still—

“You stupid—! Common sense said to abandon me! You colossal idiot!”

Irritation welled up inside her.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid! You big blockhead! Moron!"

"…Those aren't very nice things to say to the man who tried to protect you."

His words showed he understood nothing about Imina's feelings. But how could a monster understand human emotion?

"I know that! He's such a great leader that he's practically wasted on us!" She took a breath. "But you're still stupid—to get carried away by your feelings!"

"…What are you talking about?"

She ignored the questioning voice and thought. That was the deputy leader's job now that their leader was down.

Throw away your hesitation, she told herself. She suppressed the feelings of a woman who wanted to go save her man.

She had to abandon Hekkeran and take the information she'd gained back to the others. She had to tell them what a horrifying monster they'd found in the ruins and possibly put together a subjugation squad.

Evil spirits…

Is this what the king of the demons who ravaged the continent two hundred years ago was like?

She suddenly felt like her world had turned into a myth or something. That couldn't be true, but she did have a sense of dreamlike uncertainty.

Myths, huh? It's weird to say that. The ones who would fight this sort of monster were heroes…

That was when it hit her.

Yes, the ones who fought the evil spirits were heroes—the Thirteen Heroes. So the only one who would be able to fight Ainz was a hero.

"Give Hekkeran back! If we don't return in a certain amount of time, the strongest person in the world is going to storm in here! If you send us safely back to where we were before, we'll call him off."

"Another lie?" Ainz sighed.

Sweat appeared on Imina's forehead. This was true. "No, it's not a lie."

"Albedo. Is there any sign of someone strong up on the surface in this area?"

"No, my lord. This must be a silly lie."

"It's not a lie!" A girl's voice sounded behind Imina. "An adamantite-rank adventurer, Momon of Raven Black, is with us! He's the most powerful warrior! He's stronger than you!"

Albedo looked shaken for the first time. Flustered, she bowed to Ainz. "I—I beg your pardon, my lord. There was indeed an adventurer. P-please forgive me."

"Mm… Ahh well, you don't need to worry about it, Albedo. Momon of Raven Black, hmm? By the way, he… Eh, whatever. He can't win against me."

The switch from the previously furious demon king into this somewhat drained, shoulder-shrugging attitude made it seem like Ainz was hiding something, but she didn't know what it could be.

"Momon is stronger than you!"

“No, you can’t use him to negotiate. Give it up.” Ainz waved her protests away with an unmotivated air. “Okay, shall we get started?”

His vibe said the time for idle chatter was over.

“Arché! Run!” Roberdyck shouted, and Imina agreed. “Yeah! Hurry!”

“Look up! We must be outside. If you fly, you might be able to escape! Even if you’re the only one who makes it, please go! We’ll save you a minute…well, at least ten seconds!”

“That’s quite an interesting proposal. Aura, go open the door. It might be fun to play.”

“Yes, my lord!”

Ainz indicated the door through which Roberdyck and the others had come. Aura jumped, with a glimmer of her shoes, and disappeared.

“Okay, she’s teleported and is probably opening the door now. If you’d like to go, be my guest. Abandon your friends and leave. So who will run?”

Ainz gestured at the door once again. There was no expression on his bony face, but they could understand clearly—the sinister grin, the smile in anticipation of their friendship breaking.

It was true that unlike adventurers, many worker teams formed only out of an interest in money, so there was a higher chance that someone would declare every man for himself and run for it. But Foresight wasn’t like that.

“Go, Arché!”

“Yeah, you should go.” Imina smiled. “You have your little sisters, right? So leave us here and go. That’s what you need to do!”

“But this is all my fault!”

Noting that Ainz didn’t seem interested in attacking immediately, Roberdyck walked over to Arché. Then he took a small leather pouch out of his breast pocket and pressed it into her hand. “It’s okay. We’ll defeat this Ainz monster and come right after you.”

“Yeah. And then you’ll treat us to a drink.” Imina also took out a small leather pouch and gave it to Arché.

“…All right, please go. You can use the money I have stored at the inn, too.”

“And mine.”

Of course, none of them believed that would come to pass.

They didn’t have the slightest hope they would beat this unimaginable being, Ainz.

Arché knew this was their final farewell, and her response was more sob than words. “…Godt id. I’ll leab firsd, then.” She began to cast a spell.

“There are monsters in the air, so even if you try to fly away, you’ll get caught.”

“Fly!” Ignoring Ainz’s warning, she finished the spell. With one last glance at her friends, she flew into the sky.

“Well, yeah. It’s faster than walking, and you don’t get so tired.” He acted as if those things had slipped his mind. “Anyhow, I’m impressed you guys didn’t have a falling-out. I thought for sure you would make more of a scene.”

“You wouldn’t understand. We’re *friends*.”

“Yeah. It’s not so bad to die as a shield protecting your fri—”

Then something dawned on her. “Weren’t your friends like that?”

“Nrgh!”

“Your friends were probably wonderful, weren’t they? We get along just as well as you guys probably did.”

“You’re right,” Ainz murmured quietly. The evil atmosphere of a moment ago had vanished as if it were a lie. “‘Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends’—the Gospel of Mark, was it?”

“We’re fine dying. But in light of the fact that we’re taking the same action as your wonderful friends, please spare her.”

“Nrgh…” Ainz hesitated a couple of moments and then shook his head. “I have no pity for you thieves. Suffer, suffer, suffer, and then die. But in light of the fact that you were willing to give your lives to save your friend, I’ll do something else with her…”

He calmly turned his back to the two workers and called again to the VIP box. “Shalltear.” His attitude said there was no chance he would sustain damage.

But that was true. No matter what kind of attack they used, it wouldn’t reach him. The leeway he showed was due to his understanding of that. The two of them had no way to harm the monster known as Ainz. And so they stayed composed and racked their brains. They at least needed to buy Arché some time.

Even if it felt futile, they had to do it. Imina and Roberdyck exchanged glances and nodded to each other.

Meanwhile, a girl floated down from the VIP box in response to Ainz’s call.

It was a human girl with beautiful, shimmering, silver hair.

She possessed such beauty that it captured the workers’ atten-

tion despite the rage driving them.

Suddenly, the gorgeous girl shifted her gaze to look directly at them. Beautiful crimson eyes. Imina felt almost as if they were squeezing her heart. Roberdyck also seemed to be assailed by so much pressure he could barely breathe, much less move.

Even after she looked away, they couldn't move.

"Shalltear. Teach that girl the meaning of fear. Let her punishment for invading the Great Tomb of Nazarick be the plunge from the naive hope of potential escape into the despair that will occur the moment she faces the truth. Then have mercy and give her a painless death."

"Understood, Lord Ainz."

The girl—Shalltear—smiled at him. But seeing the practically sparkling smile gave Imina chills. She knew instinctively that the girl was just a monster wearing pretty skin.

"Enjoy the hunt."

"Indeed, I shall." Shalltear bowed deeply and then set off walking at a leisurely pace.

Another Imina was shouting in a corner of her mind that every step that girl took was a step closer to Arché's death, but she and Roberdyck still couldn't move.

Shalltear walked by without paying them a fraction of her attention, without giving them so much as a glance. The distance was such that if they ran they could have caught up in no time, but it felt so far.

"What's wrong? Still not going to move? You could have attacked while we were talking… You guys have better manners than I would have expected."

He wasn't making fun of them. He was serious. In a way, he seemed disappointed in them, and that gave Imina a bit of her will to fight back.

"I want to ask something! What—what about that is merciful?"

"I'll tell you…priest. Here in Nazarick, death is merciful because it means no more pain."

A silence descended. Mouths would no longer do the talking—only the weapons held in their hands.

"Let's go, Rober!"

"Indeed! Rrrraaagh!"

With an uncharacteristic battle cry, Roberdyck smashed his mace into Ainz's head. He'd struck without thinking, using all his strength. He figured Ainz wouldn't dodge, so he'd put every ounce of energy in his body into it.

The mighty blow connected with Ainz's face, but as expected, he didn't seem to feel any pain. Roberdyck unleashed a follow-up attack, thrusting out an empty hand.

"Middle Cure Wounds!"

The target of the healing spell was Ainz—because healing magic naturally hurt undead. But before it could do anything, something like an invisible wall stopped it from taking effect, just as with Arché's attack spell.

"Ahhhhh!"

With a scream that said she'd pulled out all the stops, Imina drew her bowstring—and let go. Roberdyck may have been right next to Ainz, but she wasn't so clumsy that she would accidentally hit him. At this range, she was a hundred for a hundred.

But her arrow struck Ainz and fell to the floor without wounding him at all.

He suddenly vanished.

It's the same tactic as before!

"Teleportation magic!"

"Wrong."

The voice came from behind her.

"Imi—!"

Faster than Roberdyck could scream, Ainz gently set his hand on Imina's shoulder. She sensed no hostility whatsoever.

But the effect was absolute. All the strength drained out of her body, and she crumpled. She'd managed to retain a firm grip on her consciousness, but it felt as if her muscles had turned to muck.

"What in the world did you do to her?" Roberdyck asked in a quaking voice. He didn't take his eyes off Imina on the floor or Ainz standing next to her.

"You find it strange? It's nothing really, though." Ainz gave away his trick—with a heartbreaking answer. "It was pretty much the same as what I did before. After silently casting Stop Time, I used Touch of Undeath on my way over—the same spell I used on that man on the floor over there—and then I simply touched her from behind."

A silence as if space had frozen. Roberdyck found the sound of himself swallowing strangely loud.

"…You stopped time…?"

“Yes. Gotta have a way to deal with time! You guys will have to make sure you get one once you get to level seventy. Ahh, but your lives are going to end here, so maybe not.”

Roberdyck’s teeth were chattering audibly.

That’s a lie. If he could have screamed that, how happy he would have been. How much easier would it have been to deny everything this monster—no, he was more like a god—said, plug up his ears, and curl into a ball?

He’d understood that this opponent was fairly strong.

But stopping time wasn’t something a creature of this world should be able to do.

People weren’t supposed to be able to govern or control the flow of time. So what could he hope to do against an opponent who could manipulate that? It seemed more likely that he would be able to cut down every tree in the great woodlands with a sword.

Ainz Ooal Gown... He was the type of being against which humans could never claim victory, a being in the divine realm.

Roberdyck clutched his mace in both hands—

—and felt something pat his shoulder.

“Ngha...”

His body froze. He knew who had tapped his shoulder without needing to look. Ainz, the godlike being who could manipulate time, should have been in front of him, but at some point he’d disappeared.

A chill poured in from the hand on his shoulder, and he turned into an ice sculpture. He was so immobilized that’s what it felt like.

"No, you can't."

How gentle—a voice without a shred of hostility spoke to him. The mace dropped out of Roberdyck's limp hands and fell to the ground.

"Now, then," murmured Ainz, gazing at Roberdyck, who had lost all will to fight. "That was futile, wasn't it? Nice try."

None of their attacks had any effect. They had no way to deal damage to Ainz. Thoroughly beaten, Roberdyck quietly looked up at him and asked with a calm heart, "I'd like to ask you something. What fate awaits me?"

"Hmm? You're a faith caster, so yours will be different from theirs." With those opening remarks, Ainz expounded on his plans. "First, those two. Aura, take them to the big pit. Apparently, the King of Hungry Prolyferum is running out of nests."

The dark elf's ears stiffened, and her eyes widened.

"L-Lord Ainz, what about Mare? Could I order Mare to take them there?"

"Er, sure. That's fine."

"Got it! I'll make Mare do it!"

"Oh—sorry. Anyhow, so their fate's not going to be terribly carefree. Now, about you—ah, but before that… My subordinate who just went chasing after your friend is a faith caster, but the god she believes in is completely different from yours. Or rather, I've never heard of your Four Gods. So tell me something: The subordinate deities all have names, but the Four or the Six just go by their type—god of fire, god of earth, and so on. Why is that?"

"Hmm, I don't know."

"I see… So they aren't transcendental beings possessing mysti-

cal powers but just deifications of great people from the past…"

"Nonsense!"

"Well, hear me out. That's just what I think. But you guys say you borrow the power of the gods to cast your spells. Can a dead human help you out like that? I mean, what is a god when you get down to it anyway? Do they really exist? Do you really get your power from gods?"

"…What are you trying to say?"

"…Have you ever seen a god?"

"The gods are always with us!"

"From that response, I gather that you've never actually seen one."

"No! When I use magic, I feel a great presence! That is the gods."

"…Who decided that? The gods? Or the ones who used the power?"

Roberdyck recalled various theological arguments, but he couldn't find a clear answer to Ainz's question. It was actually still a point of debate among various priests, but they had concluded that it had to be at least part of what a god was.

Roberdyck opened his mouth to speak, but Ainz bulldozed over him. "Well, supposing that 'presence' is beings from a higher dimension—gods—perhaps they're featureless. At least that's how I imagine them—basically clusters of power. The difference is what color of paint is drizzled over them… But, well, this is a world with laws of magic, so I'd like to take a jab at myself and ask what I'm even thinking. It wouldn't be strange if there were gods here."

"…"

"Sorry. That's not what I wanted to say. I wonder if it wouldn't be possible to acquire the power of your gods… To be frank, I want to perform experiments on humans."

He voiced the exceedingly dangerous idea so simply.

"Experiments on humans?"

"Yeah. For example, what would happen if I changed your memory to make you believe in different gods?"

He's insane. That was Roberdyck's instinctual impression.

No, he was talking to an undead. Nothing Ainz could do would be surprising.

Roberdyck had backed up a step, and Ainz watched him with interest. The gaze was like the one a scholar would use to observe a test animal, and it made Roberdyck feel sick.

"Why would you do that?"

"To prove the existence of the gods… Okay, but seriously, my real aim is to see if I can get stronger by understanding that power. And if gods really do exist, I need to determine if they have the emotional and intellectual capacity to become hostile. I don't believe that I'm some chosen one. I can sense more than one shadowy figure…"

I have no idea what he's talking about.

"That's why I need to expand my military. Sure, there might not be any enemies; there might not be anyone stronger than us. But don't you think it'd be irresponsible to neglect those possibilities as the leader of an organization? If you don't aim higher and simply rest on your laurels feeling strong, sooner or later someone will pull them out from under you." Ainz shrugged his shoul-

ders and finished by saying that testing if the gods existed or not was a part of that whole plan.

2

Arché breathed roughly in and out, in and out.

She shuddered every time the wind rustled the grass and trees. She scanned the area like a helpless little animal.

She was in a forest, and there were many places the light did not reach. It was blocked by the branches of the densely growing trees, so almost none of it made it to the ground.

The reason Arché could move through this place humans would normally have a hard time traversing, even though she had no light, was that she was seeing things as if it were midday thanks to Night Vision.

But even though she could see clearly, there was no end to things she had to pay attention to: underbrush that could easily hide a person, huge trees someone could definitely lurk behind, swaying branches…

Arché, a caster, wouldn't be able to muscle a monster off her if one pounced and knocked her down. Normally, her friends would jump in to save her, but now she had no one to rescue her, no one to take the brunt of a monster's attacks, and no one to heal her.

In other words, she had to detect enemies before they challenged her at close quarters; she had to keep her distance or run away. Knowing that was precisely why she was straining her attention to keep an eye on her surroundings, exhausting her mental faculties faster than usual.

Under the assumption they were outside, her original plan had been to escape all at once using Fly. But she abandoned that idea when she ascended to the treetops and caught sight of huge, dark silhouettes like paper cutouts circling the night sky as if searching for something.

Having seen those huge bat-like things, she didn't feel like trying to outfly them. Even if she used Invisibility, she couldn't fool a bat's special sensory organs.

Having confirmed the area was clear, she floated up again and proceeded at a sluggish pace.

She was moving far slower than Fly's top speed in order to take in her surroundings. If she went too fast, even if she was being cautious, she would notice any danger only once it was too late. She could even end up flying straight into a group of monsters. The only way to avoid a scenario like that was to reduce her speed.

Soon, she felt the film of magic surrounding her grow weaker. Fly's time limit was nearly up.

She landed slowly on the ground.

The problem was what to do next. It wouldn't be an issue to use Fly again. She could sense that she had enough magical energy for that. But Night Vision was critical, and there was also the cost of maintaining the defensive spell she had cast just to be safe; she also needed to save some energy in case combat became unavoidable.

Of all the spells Arché could use, the tier-three spell Fly was the most advanced. In other words, it made the biggest dent in her energy. As long as that was the case, she wanted to avoid using it, if possible.

But she couldn't even guess how long it would take her to es-

cape the forest if she couldn't use the spell that would allow her to ignore the rough terrain and save her the physical exertion of traversing it. And if she couldn't fly, she wouldn't be able to confirm her position.

Up until now, Arché had been periodically ascending to the treetops and orienting herself relative to the large tree adjacent to the arena. If she moved without using Fly, it would be easy to lose her sense of direction. She couldn't see any large trees that could be used as signposts from within the dense forest, and the situation wasn't such that she could climb the nearest one every time she wanted to check her position.

"I should take a break somewhere," she said to herself.

If she took a break and recovered some magical energy, she would be able to use Fly many more times, and it would be safer to move in daylight anyhow. Many forest-dwelling monsters were nocturnal.

It would be far safer to spend the night in hiding than to force herself through the dark forest.

But she didn't know where she could take shelter.

If Imina had been there, she would have told her. If Hekkeran and Roberdyck had been there, she could have rested easy even in a dangerous area. Now, though, she didn't have any teammates to rely on.

"Imina… Roberdyck…" She leaned against a tree and thought of her friends. "You liars…"

So much time had passed, and yet she hadn't gotten any word from them.

So they couldn't escape.

No, she had already known—that they wouldn't be able to beat that incomparably powerful being, Ainz. Then perhaps the reason she held out a faint hope was that she was a fool…

She sat heavily, rested her back on the tree, and closed her eyes. She was aware of the danger, but she just wanted to close her eyes.

She squeezed them shut and thought of her three friends.

The bark of the tree felt pleasantly cool against her head. Once she had a rested a moment, it hit her how tired she really was. Her elevated tension weighed her down with mental exhaustion.

She sighed.

She relaxed her neck and tilted her head back.

And her eyes nearly popped out of it.

She couldn't process the thing that appeared in her vivid field of Night Vision.

Something was looking down at her.

It was a girl Arché had never seen before, so beautiful she got the chills.

Her clothes were entirely out of place—a soft-looking raven-black ball gown. Her skin was almost waxy white. She had gathered up her long silver hair in one hand so it didn't hang down onto Arché.

Even the former noble Arché had never seen a girl this pretty. If she appeared at a ball, all the men would be clamoring for her attention. With that beauty, she could probably get whatever she wanted. The red eyes were so bewitching, she felt like her soul might get sucked out.

Arché immediately came back to herself. *Someone dressed like that shouldn't be in a place like this.* Besides, she had her feet planted on the tree and was standing perpendicular to its trunk.

The possibility that came to mind was that she was giving chase on behalf of Ainz. But she couldn't say for sure that she wasn't a longtime inhabitant of the forest.

"Are we done playing tag?"

Her faint hope was crushed.

"You're after me?" Arché leaped to her feet and pointed her staff at the girl while securing some distance.

Meanwhile, the girl seemed to almost have lost interest in Arché and walked down the tree onto the ground. "Better run."

"If I defeat you right here, I'll be able to get away safely," she said, though she was grimacing on the inside. She knew she wouldn't be able to beat any pursuer sent by that monster stronger than the bounds of common sense allowed. But she put on a brave front to gauge her opponent's reaction.

"Go right ahead. I have time for a dalliance." Her attitude said she was fully aware of the gap between their abilities. In other words, fighting Arché was only a game for her.

"Fly!"

Arché cast the spell and began her escape. She didn't have time to fly sluggishly near the ground. She ascended all at once. Protecting her face with her hands, she sped through the branches and popped out above the trees.

Arché took in her surroundings beneath the night sky. She was on guard against the presence of a monster like those huge bats she had seen before, but she didn't see any nearby. Then all she

had to do was flee.

"Yeah! You can do it! You can do it!"

Just as she was about to get away, a pretty voice cheered her on. Her heart nearly jumped out of her chest. Her eyes roamed, trying to find where the voice had come from. Then in front of her, higher than she was—at some point the girl had appeared.

"Lightning!"

A pale-blue shock ripped across the sky from the tip of Arché's staff and struck her. It was the highest-tier attack spell Arché could use, but even when it zapped through the girl, her smile didn't waver.

She's a being equal to Ainz, Arché realized. That meant she didn't stand a chance. As she attempted to flee, the girl's voice shouted gleefully. "My kin!"

Huge wings sprouted from her back. They were like bat wings, only gigantic. An extraordinarily large bat separated from her and took flight. Of course, the crimson-eyed bat couldn't be a mere beast.

The girl sneered at her as the bat climbed into the sky with audible flaps of its wings. It was a sinister smile that didn't seem her age at all and made Arché's blood run cold.

"Now then, do your best to flee…"

Arché flew away.

She thought only of fleeing and flew.

She swooped into the forest to lose the thing chasing her and flew, though the branches hurt her.

The reason she had left her teammates behind was to flee. She

had to at least get away. She would do anything to get away.

And how long had she been flying when…? She met despair face-to-face.

A wall.

There was an invisible wall.

Though the world went on and on, a wall stood in her way. She was over six hundred feet aboveground. The wall went that high.

"What…?" she murmured, hopeless. She flew, brushing her hand along it, but *wall, wall, wall, wall.*

Yes, the hard sensation under her hand remained wherever she went.

"What *is* this?"

"A wall."

She was talking to herself, so there shouldn't have been an answer, and yet… With an idea of whose voice it was, she turned around with a worn-out look on her face.

It was who she had expected: the little girl. And near her flapped three of those huge bats.

"You seem to have misunderstood something. This is the sixth level of the Great Tomb of Nazarick. In other words, you're underground."

"*This* is?" She pointed at the world around them. The sky had stars, a breeze was blowing, and a forest spread across the earth. Her idea that a place like this couldn't possibly be underground clashed with the thought that these people could probably pull off something like that.

“The Forty-One Supreme beings are the former rulers of this land, as well as our creators. This is a system they built that even we cannot comprehend.”

“They created the world? But that’s what the gods…”

“Exactly. To us, Lord Ainz and the others who were once with us are godlike beings.”

Arché looked around.

She had already accepted it. Having been told all that, what other choice did she have but to accept? She would never get out of this place alive.

“Now then, you aren’t going to run away?”

“Can I?”

“No. Because I have no intention of allowing you to escape.”

“I see.”

She clenched her staff in both hands and lunged at the girl. She was out of magical energy, so she couldn’t use any spells. But she would still fight to run, all the way to the end. That’s what she had to do as the last remaining member of Foresight.

“Yes, yes, nicely done,” the girl responded to Arché’s desperate charge in a bored voice. “Your getaway ends here. How unfortunate that you didn’t collapse into a sobbing heap.”

The girl effortlessly caught Arché’s staff mid-swing and yanked it toward her. Arché lost her balance and fell into the girl. The pair of them wrestled in midair.

In one smooth motion, the girl buried her face in Arché’s neck. Arché struggled, trying to throw her off, but she wouldn’t budge—it was as if they were glued together.

She shivered at an unpleasantly warm breath on the nape of her neck.

"...Oh. You smell all sweaty."

Arché was a worker. She couldn't help it if her body wasn't pristine while she was on a job. It was just par for the course for workers, adventurers, travelers, and anyone outside for long periods of time. If anybody got called dirty, they would just say *And?* and laugh.

But when a gorgeous girl younger than her said it, she couldn't help but feel ashamed.

The girl's face moved away from Arché's neck. The moment she saw those crimson eyes, she was seized by an intense loathing —because her eyes were like those of a lustful man about to devour a woman's body.

"Relax. You'll go to your death painlessly. Be grateful for Lord Ainz's mercy."

"!" She'd been about to talk back, but she was shocked—by the fact that she couldn't move. It was as if her soul had been swallowed up by those crimson eyes.

That was when the true nature of this girl finally dawned on Arché. Her opponent wasn't a human but a vampire.

"...And now..." The girl brought her face in close, and the tongue that slipped between her parted lips licked Arché's cheek. "Salty."

The girl grinned, and despair tormented Arché's heart.

The girl's grin widened.

Her lips reached her ears in a smile that threatened to split her face right open. Pigment seeped from her irises, turning her eye-

balls entirely bloodred.

Then her mouth sprang open. It had been lined with pretty white teeth, but now it had sprouted multiple sharklike rows of countless narrow, white things reminiscent of syringes. Her oral cavity sparkled wetly, gleaming an obscene pink as clear drool spilled from the corners of her mouth.

The fear welling up from the pit of Arché's stomach enveloped her.

"Ah-ha! Ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Before this cackling monster belching the stench of blood, Arché parted from her mind.

The last thing she thought of were her two sisters waiting for her at home.

"Huhhhh? You blacked ouuuuuuuuut? Then I don't have to knock you unconscious with magic. Enter the god of death's embrace right there from your dreams."

3

Ainz left the job of disposing of the raiders to the others, booted up the monitor in the Throne Room, and browsed Nazarick's data. The thing he'd been most worried about, their available funds, had barely changed at all, because they hadn't used any traps that cost money. This was plenty worthy of being called a success.

He smiled—although his skull face didn't move—at Albedo, who was waiting nervously for his critique, and praised her.

“Magnificent. Those raiders were weak, but for humans in this world, they were on the strong side. If you were able to get rid of them with so few expenses, then I have no problem leaving Nazarick’s defenses up to you.”

“Thank you.” Visibly relieved, she bowed deeply. “Lord Ainz, how are you doing on time?”

“Fine. I heard from Pandora’s Actor that although the workers are running late, they decided to wait a day or until they notice some change in the ruins.”

Faced with the reality of not a single worker returning in the morning, the adventurers panicked, but Momon—Pandora’s Actor—proposed that they wait a day. In the event of an emergency, the plan had been to evacuate the base and watch from a safer distance, but an adamantite-rank adventurer’s words carried more weight.

“Then could I trouble you for a moment? I wanted to suggest something…”

“What is it, Albedo? Wait just a second… Okay, no problem.” He checked Hamusuke and the lizardmen on the monitor before turning back around. “Okay, what’s your suggestion?”

“Ahem.” She looked around the room before speaking. “It’s related to something those fools said earlier. I’m wondering how high you are prioritizing finding the other Supreme Beings.”

“It’s our most important task. As long as we’re not putting the Great Tomb of Nazarick in danger, it’s my highest priority,” Ainz answered immediately.

“Okay. I understand. Then I want to propose this all the more. I’d like permission to form a team directly under me that will search for them.”

"What do you mean?"

His tone was unintentionally sharp—because she'd hit on his heart's hidden desire.

There had been plenty of opportunities to search for his guildmates. But each time he didn't have anyone to help, or they didn't have enough intelligence, so he had been continuously putting off making a plan.

What if we searched every corner of this world and didn't find them? When he thought of that possibility, it was hard to get started. Rather than putting in a lot of effort only to confirm he was alone, he would become a monster bent on improving his reputation; that allowed him to hold on to some hope.

"It was immediately clear that the claims the fools were making earlier were false, but in the future, there may be times when the truth of such a claim is more difficult to ascertain. I would like to form a team that both confirms the reliability of our information and searches for the Supreme Beings. I thought it might be good if I did a detailed investigation and then reported to you."

Ainz put a hand to his chin and groaned. "I see…" Recalling his earlier conversation with the workers, he felt not anger but emptiness. There was nothing more painful than being kept hovering on the border between hope and despair. It seemed that whatever his personal feelings were, it was time, as head of the organization, to take a decisive step forward, even if it were a small one.

"It wouldn't have to be you, would it? I want you to continue the fine job you do managing the tomb. Assuming such a team would be outside Nazarick gathering intelligence…it seems like Mare and Aura would be appropriate? Supposedly, there are dark elves out there, so they would even fit in."

"It's as you say, my lord. However, there is one thing that wor-

ries me, and that is the possibility of reckless actions. For example, just how we might suppose Shalltear would behave recklessly if she caught wind of Lord Peroroncino, it is unclear how Mare and Aura would react if they heard something about Lady BubblingTeapot."

"I see..." Ainz winced as he recalled Shalltear. "Yeah, you may be right."

"So I humbly arrived at the conclusion that we should create a team under me."

"...You wouldn't get reckless if you found out something about Tabula?"

"You can rest at ease. As the captain of Nazarick's guardians, I would never do such a thing. I promise."

"I see..."

The chances of wise Albedo, so skilled in managing Nazarick's internal organization, running wild were low. Now and then, she did something a little stupid, but she still handled Nazarick while Ainz was away with no problem, so he trusted her.

"Personally, I think Demiurge would also be a good choice, but he's busy with various other things. Adding the important role of gathering intelligence about the Supreme Beings to his workload would be too much, I think."

"That's reasonable. What about using Pandora's Actor?"

"That is precisely what I would like to do. Please allow me to borrow him as my aide-de-camp."

"I see. Two of Nazarick's best minds are unmistakably better than one, but...he also has to manage the treasury. Let me lend him to you when you need him."

"Thank you. And may I inquire about some related matters?"

Ainz gestured with his chin that she should go ahead.

"If possible, I'd like this Supreme Being search party under me to have strong members."

"That's only natural. I'll provide you with our most elite minions."

"Thank you. It would also be great if I could get the undead aide you created."

"That's a no. That one is level ninety if I remember correctly, but…" The undead Ainz could create with a skill using experience points, such as an overlord wiseman or a grim reaper thanatos, were stronger than NPCs for hire; he could only make one, but it was powerful. The problem was that as long as he didn't have a way to gain vast amounts of experience here like he could in *Yggdrasil*, he wanted to avoid using skills that consumed it. "Yeah, no. You'll be responsible for the team, and Pandora's Actor will aid you. Let's make the rest monsters."

"Understood. Then one other thing: I'd like to keep this team secret from the other guardians."

"Why? Wouldn't it be better to have their cooperation?"

"No. If word got out, the guardians and others created by the Supreme Beings may ask to be taken along so they can see for themselves. In the case of a trap, that would mean leaping needlessly into danger. I have superior defensive skills, so I'm confident that I could escape and make it back if it was just me, but with others along…"

"That makes sense. Okay, Albedo. We'll do it your way."

"Thank you, Lord Ainz!" She bowed so low her long hair com-

pletely covered her face.

"That's fine. More importantly, I'm counting on you, you know!"

"Yes, my lord! My secret special-ops group on orders of the utmost importance will be sure not to disappoint you!"

Ainz cocked his head in his mind. That seemed like a strange way to respond. *Well, whatever.*

"Okay, let's select your subordinates. Instead of having you pull ones who are stationed in Nazarick, how about we create some new ones? How many in their eighties do you want?"

"For now, fifteen would suffice."

"Fifteen? Isn't that kind of a…?" Having said that much, Ainz shook his head. Searching for his old friends was critical. In that case, fifteen was barely even an expense. "No, you're right. Okay."

"I also wanted to ask your permission to grant Rubedo commanding authority…"

"Rejected." His answer was immediate.

Rubedo was the strongest individual in Nazarick. In a pure melee fight, she was stronger than Sebas, Cocytus, or Albedo. Compared to Rubedo, whom Ainz probably couldn't beat fully equipped, even Shalltear seemed weak.

The only ones who can beat her are those stationed on the eighth level, and that's only if we also use a World Item. I doubt she could actually take one of them, but…

"Since the test to boot her up was successful, I don't feel the need to do anything with her for the time being. More importantly, why would you need that much combat power?"

“It’s embarrassing, but shall I tell you?”

“Go ahead?”

“I just thought since I had the opportunity, I should try to make the strongest team possible.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha!” It was incredibly childish, but still, Ainz could understand how she felt, so he burst out laughing. The emotion was suppressed at once, but he still felt ripples of pleasant feelings.

“Lord Ainz!”

Albedo seemed upset, but Ainz grinned at her—although his face didn’t move—and said, “Sorry, sorry. Er, yeah. That’s very interesting. I see. Then let’s give your little sister commanding authority.”

“Are you sure it’s all right?”

“Sure, it’s fine. You should make your dream team. Besides, maybe I’ll make use of their power for something else in the future.”

“Thank you, Lord Ainz!”

She was bowing so deeply he couldn’t see her expression, but he assumed it was her usual smile. When he turned his attention back to the monitor, Entoma entered the Throne Room.

She strode directly to a place near the throne, got down on one knee, and bowed her head low.

“Do excuse me.”

“What is it, Entoma?”

She verbally acknowledged Albedo’s stern query without

changing her posture and then replied, “I’m here to report that it’s time for Mistress Aura and Master Mare to depart.”

“I see… Raise your head.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Entoma gave another clipped acknowledgment and looked up.

“I have some time, so I’ll go see them off. It would be tactless to just say good-bye via magic. Sorry, Entoma, but please go ahead of me and tell them I’m coming.”

“Understood.”

With her eyes on Entoma as she stood and walked away, Albedo asked Ainz, “Lord Ainz, did that not displease you? It shouldn’t have been Entoma but one of the other maids. I’ll reprimand them.”

“…What?”

“I just thought hearing that rude little girl’s voice would—”

“Ohh, don’t worry about that. On the contrary, I was the one who recommended it—wait, Entoma!”

“My lord! What is it?” She turned around flustered, but Ainz stopped her from returning and instructed her to speak to him from where she was.

“What did you do with the rest of her? Were you sure to make good use of all her parts?”

“Yes. One of the silk hats took her head. The dead man’s struggles shared her arms. Master Demiurge took her skin. The rest went to feed Grant’s children, so I think we can say everything was put to good use.”

“Okay. That’s fine, then. It’s our responsibility as the ones who

hunted and killed her to not waste anything. Any hunter would surely do the same. It's like a memorial offering."

"How kind you are, Lord Ainz. But of course a Supreme Being would show such mercy, even to a dirty thief. Any member of Nazarick would surely be moved to tears if they heard what you said just now." Albedo's voice had become emotional.

Even Entoma's unusual eyes seemed to contain a hint of respect.

"Er, well, sure… In the end, it's my feeling on the matter; I don't intend to coerce you all into it. That said, I still think it's polite to use all the parts of those we kill to our advantage."

"Understood! Then we'll make sure to use the others to the fullest as well."

As the pair of them bowed, Ainz had the same sensation he did when his buttons were done up a hole off, but he answered "good" nonetheless.

4

There were a number of meeting and sitting rooms inside the Ministry of Magic complex. The one Fluder was heading for was the sitting room with the most luxurious furnishings. It was only used when the emperor or someone of similar rank visited.

He stood outside and checked his appearance.

His robe was a first-rate article he could have worn to a soiree hosted by the emperor, and the perfume he'd applied on the sleeves and collar was giving off a pleasant scent.

Normally, Fluder had nothing to do with politics or society. Or rather, his wish was to focus solely on his magic research, so he found other things bothersome. Still, he knew he wasn't in a position where he could insist on ignoring them.

He didn't want his appearance to tarnish the empire's dignity.

All right, I'm fine.

After confirming nothing was amiss, he knocked on the door and opened it.

There were two adventurers in the splendid room: a warrior wearing raven-black armor almost like the kind the death knight he had just visited wore and an eye-catching—even Fluder's, for a moment—beauty.

Momon from Raven Black. Beautiful Princess Nabe…

"Apologies for keeping you waiting." Fluder quietly closed the door and suddenly realized something felt strange.

That's odd…

Still at the door, he squinted at the peerless beauty.

"…I can't see it?" Fluder, with his eyes, should have been able to see something else overlapping her figure. He was so shocked that he couldn't, he murmured in spite of himself.

Fluder had been born with a talent: He could see auras around casters that showed what tiers of magic they could use.

But even though Raven Back's Beautiful Princess Nabe was a caster, he couldn't detect an aura.

Detection defense?

That was all he could think. In that case, a question arose:

Why would she be using detection defense? Normal adventurers normally didn't go so far. It was a nuisance to allot some of their power for that, and they weren't often in a position where they had to be wary in such a manner. On top of that, meeting someone with detection defense active could be considered rude.

Of course, the side using a detection ability has no manners, either…but why would she conceal her power?

Fluder's talent was known far and wide, so perhaps it was a measure against it, but that didn't answer the question.

A suspicious voice called out to Fluder. "Is something the matter?"

"Ohhh, how rude of me." Fluder took a seat facing Momon. Still, he couldn't help glancing at Nabe out of the corner of his eye.

"Ahh, I see. Well, shall we begin?"

Begin what?

Before Fluder could ask, Momon continued, "Nabe, maybe it's about time you took off your ring."

"Understood."

She took off her ring. That moment—

—it was like being hit with a bomb blast.

"Wha—?!"

He thought he might scream.

Nabe was giving off an overpowering amount of energy.

It wasn't as if he could feel actual air pressure. This was a tor-

rent of power only people with the same talent as Fluder could see.

He curled up and shivered like someone being blown on by a northerly wind.

"This…this can't…"

This can't be. It's just not possible. This kind of power, greater than his own, shouldn't have existed.

And yet, he couldn't force the rest of his denial out. The scene before his eyes was reality. His ability had never betrayed him before. That meant it was true that this woman's power far surpassed his own.

"Tier seven…? No… Could this immense rush of energy…be proof of…tier eight…?"

If that were the case, she had reached the mythological realm.

Fluder could no longer speak. The fifth tier of magic was the heroic realm. And the sixth tier, which Fluder had reached, was untrodden territory. Someone who, nevertheless, could effortlessly enter the next tier had suddenly appeared before him; no wonder he was speechless.

And she was such a pretty young lady.

Maybe her appearance doesn't reflect her age?!

As he trembled with astonishment, Fluder noticed out of the corner of his eye that Momon was removing his black gauntlets. Then he took off one of his rings.

"!"

For an instant, the world whited out in a flash, and Fluder had the feeling he had lost consciousness.

What had just happened was incomprehensible. Even Fluder, who had been alive over two hundred years, who could use the highest tier of magic humans had ever reached, could not understand it.

"Wh-wh-wh-what—what in the world?!"

Something hot flowed onto Fluder's cheeks, but he had neither the presence of mind nor the energy to wipe it away. The shock was that upsetting.

Who could have predicted it? Who could have guessed that the man hailed as the Dark Warrior was actually an arcane caster at a level Fluder could only dream of?

"If she's tier eight, then…tier nine? No… What…? Ohh, dear gods…"

The overwhelming amount of energy bursting from Momon the Dark Warrior easily transcended Nabe's. *If he's beyond Nabe, who's at tier eight, then how high is the tier he uses?*

The question from a corner of his brain was answered by his soul.

The tenth tier… It was the absolute realm, presumed to exist, but which no one had ever confirmed. A being from that supreme realm had arrived before him.

Fluder had stood and now kneeled before Momon, tears still streaming down his face.

"I believed in lesser deities who governed magic. However, if you are not one of them, my faith has just been extinguished—because a true god has just appeared before me." Fluder vigorously prostrated himself, banging his head into the floor. The pain was nothing compared to the irrepressible joy in his heart. "I realize it's impertinent, but you have my gratitude in advance! Please

grant me your wisdom! I wish to peer into the abyss of magic! I beg you! I beg you!"

"And how much will you pay for it?"

The voice was cold like a sheet of ice—ask anyone and they would have agreed—but Fluder could only hear it as sweet music to his ears. He knew, of course, that it was toxic, but what did that matter?

He would pay any price with zero hesitation, even offer his soul.

"Everything! Yes, I will give everything I have to you, my lord, master of the abyss, the ever profound one."

"...Very well. If you will give me everything, then I will make my knowledge yours. I'll grant your wish."

"Ohhh! Ohhhhhh!" Fluder cried tears of joy, still grinding his head into the floor. His heart, which had been a hard nugget of envy, melted. He had been waiting over two hundred years, but the possibility of realizing his dream was finally at hand.

Ecstatic with excitement, he edged toward Ainz without raising his head and kissed his master's greaves. He had originally planned to lick them, but he worried it would displease this god, so he compromised by taking a tip from a composed corner of his mind and drawing the line at using his lips.

"That's enough. I acknowledge your devotion."

"Ohhhh! Thank you.....master!"

"Your first order is to send sacrifices to my castle!"

"Gramps! Gramps! What's wrong, Gramps?"

Fluder, lost in thought, came back to himself at the sound of a

voice calling him. The shocking encounter from several days before still loomed large in his mind and immediately beckoned him to a fantasy land if he relaxed his focus.

Fluder blinked several times and remembered where he was, then bobbed his head to the one addressing him.

"I beg your pardon, Your Imperial Majesty. I was just thinking."

There was only one person who called Fluder "Gramps"—the emperor of the Baharuth Empire, Jircniv Rune Farlord El Nix. And this was his office.

Normally, the room didn't have so many people in it, but today it was unusually crowded. There was Jircniv himself, along with four guards; Fluder Paradyne, the empire's most powerful wizard; ten of Jircniv's most trusted retainers, who were sharp enough to supplement even the emperor's unparalleled intelligence; as well as one of the Four, said to be the strongest knights in the empire, Lightning Baswood Peshmel.

They all sat where they pleased and had been debating imperial policy. The papers scattered everywhere spoke to how heated the meeting had become. Some of the participants were even starting to lose their voices.

The young emperor, known also as the Fresh Blood Emperor, said something to Fluder that he never said to anyone: "Don't worry about it. I cause a lot of trouble for you. I'd like to hold back a bit, since you're getting older, but I can't seem to help but rely on you. Forgive me."

"I'm grateful for your kind consideration, Your Imperial Majesty, but I am your faithful servant. Please order me without compunction." Fluder accepted the emperor's sentiments and bowed slightly.

He's grown into a fine young man, thought Fluder, looking at the handsome youth.

Fluder had begun serving the empire about six generations previous.

He hadn't gotten along with the emperor at the time, six emperors ago. Still, his elite magic ability found him in one of the highest positions at court almost immediately after he was invited.

Consequently, he was a little closer with the following emperor, and at the same time he was granted the position of principal court wizard, he was engaged in the magic education of the emperor's heir.

Three emperors ago, he began passing on all sorts of wisdom as a more general teacher and became deeply involved in policy.

Then came the current emperor, so precious to him.

Fluder had witnessed generations of emperors, and there was not a single incompetent one among them. Each of them seemed chosen by the gods in their excellence; they were all children blessed with aptitude (although the first one he served was in the prime of his life). Even in that splendid company, the current emperor was exceedingly bright. Although it had been in the works for two generations, the reason they were able to declare the country an absolute monarchy was his ability.

Fluder loved Jircniv Rune Farlord El Nix.

He'd poured himself into his education as if he were his own son. He was sure the emperor thought of him as a second father, too.

Still…

Even if he loved him like his own son, he would cut him off.

I want to peer into the abyss of magic, Jir. To do that, there is nothing I wouldn't abandon, even a charming boy like you.

"So, Your Imperial Majesty, are you all right with completely canceling this season's invasion of the kingdom?"

"Yeah. Looking into that demon Jaldabaoth is more important. Gramps, did you come up with anything?"

"I'm afraid not, Your Imperial Majesty. We're looking, but we haven't found any documentation."

Yes. That was his story.

"Sir Paradyne, can you not investigate using magic?"

Fluder put on a prudent expression and half closed his eyes. "Certainly magic possesses omnipotent potential, but…"

"Sorry, Gramps. You tend to ramble about that stuff. Better skip ahead."

"Understood, Your Imperial Majesty." Fluder looked disappointed and continued in the tone of a teacher instructing a dull-witted child. "There are ways to counter magical searches. For instance, do you know the walls of this room have a barrier to keep sound from escaping? There are other examples. Detection magic obstruction is one."

"Aha… So there are all sorts of methods for countering, and that makes it difficult…"

"Yes. And we would have to consider ourselves lucky if our spell getting negated were the end of it. Casters in higher realms sometimes prepare counterattacks against detection magic—spells that could even kill someone if they weren't careful."

What use could my level of magic be to the Supreme One? …

There is truly no one more worthy of the words Supreme One *than him… I must show him I can be useful as soon as possible…*

Several people made sour faces when he mentioned that one could be instantly killed in a counterattack, but Fluder wasn't interested in their opinions.

"In that case"—one of the retainers picked up a sheet of paper—"does the fact that you managed to locate what appears to be the base of the caster Ainz Ooal Gown mean that you're superior to him?"

"Don't be naive!" He suppressed a bitter grin and spoke forcefully so they would sense his irritation. "You're being too optimistic. When we noticed that he had saved the village of Carne—no, that he had saved *only* the village of Carne—we were monitoring the entire vicinity when we discovered the ruins. Since we had never heard of them before, we continued monitoring and just happened to see the caster Ainz Ooal Gown enter them. You'll land yourself in trouble if you forget that it was nothing more than serendipity!"

He meant it in part. Only a fool would take the Supreme One lightly. Well, he'd done it, too, but how pitiful it was to be ignorant.

Fluder inwardly sneered at his previous, foolish self. *What a truly dark time that was.*

"I beg your pardon."

Fluder accepted the apology with a raised hand.

"Oh, speaking of which, Gramps, what happened with the workers we sent in?"

"I received the first report via Message from a spy I had tail them, and it appears they've been wiped out."

Jircniv counted the days on his fingers, and his eyes widened just a little. He had heard they sent multiple rather outstanding teams. If they were really all annihilated in a day, or maybe even only half a day, that would be surprising.

Of course, Fluder wasn't surprised. He thought it was an utterly natural outcome. But the expression he put on his face was one of disbelief.

"…Really? Still, we can't rely only on magic intelligence. When will the adventurers be back?"

"When no one returned, they decided to withdraw immediately, but it will take about four more days."

"So to get information from the returned adventurers, it will take…at least five days? I guess we can't make any moves during that time, then?"

Message was not a very reliable source of intelligence. The farther away someone was, the harder it was to hear them. But there were other reasons that many nations didn't trust the spell enough to use it for important matters.

The most famous incident was probably the tragedy of the country called Gattenburg.

Gattenburg was a human nation of mainly casters that three hundred years ago made it possible to rapidly share information by connecting its cities with Message. They trusted Message too much, and just three pieces of false intelligence plunged the country into civil war. The cities fought one another, and when monsters and subhumans attacked on top of that, the country fell to ruin.

The bards sang many other tragic tales, such as the one about the man who killed his wife after hearing she was unfaithful, but it turned out to be a lie.

For all those reasons, there were few people who trusted Message. Rather, people who trusted it too much were liable to be called fools. Jircniv was one of the people who didn't put much faith in the spell. He did use it, but he made it a rule to have an additional source for his information. He never relied solely on magic.

"But what an idiot. If he had hired a worker team out of E-Rantel, things would have gone more our way. His incompetence is why we can have him dance in the palm of our hand, but at the same time, it's a problem if he's too incompetent. We need him to be a better decoy."

"It's just as you say, Your Imperial Majesty."

Jircniv furrowed his brow at Fluder's agreement.

The plan they had created upon accepting Fluder's proposal at a meeting several days ago had two objectives.

One was to grasp Ainz Ooal Gown's personality.

Fluder had noticed that Ainz Ooal Gown's presence hadn't moved from the ruins for a few days. This led them to conclude the ruins were the caster's base, so they sent the worker teams in to gauge Ainz's reaction.

How would he react to someone intruding into his home—moderately or severely?

From the fact that the workers had been wiped out, they had grasped one facet of his personality.

The other object was to sour the relationship between Ainz Ooal Gown and the kingdom. The best would have been to hire workers from E-Rantel, but unfortunately that's not how it happened.

He wasn't that stupid…

The only information that had gone to the count was that there were some unexplored ruins. It would have taken guts to hire kingdom workers for the shady purpose of ransacking ruins in kingdom territory on behalf of a noble from the empire. Hiring workers from the empire was the best they could have expected him to do.

But that wouldn't sour the relationship between Ainz Ooal Gown and E-Rantel, much less the relationship between him and Re-Estize as a whole. So to accomplish the second goal, they had to make sure word of the ruins got to the Adventurers Guild in the kingdom as well.

"Momon's visit to the empire worked in our favor."

"It sure did. He'll probably be the one to tell the guild over there that the workers were all killed in those unexplored ruins. Once they know the empire is targeting the ruins, they'll get serious and mount their own expedition."

They had shoehorned adventurers into this plan expressly for that purpose. Of course, they hadn't exercised the emperor's authority at all. They had used spies to spread intelligence.

They had to make sure the story of this incident ended simply as one lone noble acting recklessly. That way, even if the empire's involvement came out, Ainz Ooal Gown's anger would be directed at the count they had manipulated, and Jircniv would be able to work things to his favor.

"So then we'll have kingdom adventurers invading the residence of Ainz Ooal Gown, who is known to react severely. How will this immensely powerful caster respond to the kingdom? And what will the guild do after he inflicts his revenge on them?"

Looking forward to it. Jircniv smiled and then confirmed just

to be sure, “So we understand the power of Ainz Ooal Gown. He’s strong enough to obliterate worker teams with no trouble. And we can pin all this neatly on one stupid noble, right?”

“Of course. We were very discreet, so only the people in this room know what really happened.”

“Okay, that’s fine, then. I just wanted to— Huh?!”

A vibration like the rumbling of the earth interrupted him. The furniture shook and the windows rattled, but it didn’t feel like an earthquake. It was more like something huge had crashed into the ground, with one big jolt.

“What was that?! Find ou— What a racket. What’s going on?!”

Jircniv could hear screams coming from not only inside the room but outside as well. The room had thick, sturdy walls, so the voice had to be incredibly loud. Or was it more than one? What could have caused something so out of place as a shriek in this place?

A guard who had peeked through a gap in the curtains into the courtyard, where the screams seemed to be coming from, answered with a pale face. “Your Imperial Majesty! It’s a dragon! A dragon has landed in the courtyard!”

For a moment, everyone was dazed. The couldn’t understand what had just been said. Well, how could they have? Though they knew he wouldn’t lie, they all rushed to the window to confirm with their own eyes.

They practically ripped the curtains off the window, they yanked them so hard. When they looked through the semitransparent glass and saw the dragon sitting imposingly in the middle of the courtyard, all their jaws dropped.

“Wh-why is there a dragon here? Where did it come from?”

“Foreign affairs minister! Was anyone outrageous enough to ride a dragon into our courtyard supposed to visit today?!”

“No, I’ve heard nothing of the sort.”

“Have you ever met the dragons from the Council State? Is it one of those?”

“…It doesn’t look anything like descriptions I’ve heard, and I heard them from a diplomat, so they should be reliable.”

“Still, the biggest problem is how it was allowed to penetrate this far! The emperor is here! What is the Imperial Air Guard doing?!”

With their tough bodies wrapped in hard scales, life spans far longer than humans’, and magical ability on top of various skills, dragons were the most powerful beings in the world. Of course, their strength ran the gamut; there was no lack of dragons who had been slain by adventurers, but looking back through history, neither was it rare for cities or even whole countries to be destroyed by angry dragons. The destruction of a city in a country to the south twenty-odd years ago was still fresh in everyone’s memory.

One of those fearsome beings landing in the courtyard of the imperial palace was an unthinkable emergency.

Even Jircniv himself was swallowing hard and waiting to see what would happen when he saw two small figures get off the dragon.

If he squinted, he could make out two children with brown skin like they had suntans.

“They must be dark elves.” Fluder calmly stated the pair’s race.

“Sir Paradyne! What is that dragon?! Who are those elves?!”

“Well, I don’t know this dragon, either…”

Knights surrounded the children who had dismounted, as well as the dragon itself, as a matter of protocol. The knights were the empire’s pride, but they looked awfully unreliable opposite a dragon. It truly was the strongest creature in existence.

From the knights’ ranks, one man with a shield in either hand stepped forward.

“Whoa, whoa. *He’s* going? Well, he’s the only one who really could…but wouldn’t it be a shame to lose him?”

The one who approached the dragon was Unshakable Nazami Eneck.

He was one of the empire’s top fighters, said to be the strongest of the Four in a defensive battle. He was resistant to many different types of energies but looked utterly flimsy compared to the dragon. Everyone had to nod in response to the comment that seemed to imply it was Lightning Baswood Peshmel’s comrade’s final hour.

“Your Imperial Majesty, please evacuate!”

“Where would I go? Where’s even safe?”

The retainer regained composure at Jircniv’s scoffing reply.

“But!”

“I get it. I get what you’re trying to say. But I’d be a laughingstock if I fled the imperial palace, even if were up against a dragon. It doesn’t seem like a Council State dragon, but if it did this knowing I wouldn’t be able to run away… I’ve heard dragons are clever, but this one appears informed of our political situation as well.”

He was purging the nobles, but that was on the military

strength of the knights. If word got out that he abandoned the castle when a dragon appeared, there was a good chance the nobles would think, *So that's the extent of his power?* and rebel all at once.

He wasn't about to let a mob defeat him, but the empire would still lose a chunk of its might.

Whether I fight or run, it'll end in a loss. What a nasty move to make. Who is that dragon?

More people had gathered in the courtyard. There were the forty men from the emperor's guard and sixty knights, plus arcane and faith casters.

"I'm not sure a hundred and twenty people is enough. I think I should go, too, Your Imperial Majesty."

Jircniv furrowed his brow slightly. Fluder was the empire's greatest trump card. He wasn't sure if it would be profitable to play him against a dragon. The thing that finally ended his hesitation was his belief that Fluder would surely be able to escape in a worst-case scenario.

But Jircniv didn't know that Fluder volunteered to go to avoid having to teleport the emperor to safety.

"Thanks, Gramps. If possible, can you get Unshakable to fall back?"

"Understood. However, our opponents are unfathomable. They may be astonishingly powerful, so you should prepare to run."

With that, Fluder flung open the window. Then he threw himself into the air and flew up into the sky with a flying spell.

"Uh, can everyone hear me all right? I am Aura Bella

Fiora, servant of Ainz Ooal Gown."

Just then an incredibly loud voice echoed out.

"The emperor of this place sent some rude guys to Lord Ainz's home, the Great Tomb of Nazarick! Lord Ainz is not amused. So if the emperor doesn't come to apologize, we'll destroy the country!"

Jircniv grimaced. Who reached that conclusion and how? How had they followed such a fine trail of evidence?

Looking around the room, he was met with shocked faces. Realizing what he had in mind, they all shook their heads.

"For starters, we'll kill all the humans here! Mare!"

The dark elf standing next to him thrust a staff into the ground. That instant, it seemed like a huge, localized earthquake occurred in the courtyard—the only reason there was any doubt was because Jircniv didn't feel a thing. Still, with the dragon and the dark elves as the epicenter, the ground shrieked, ripping open a pattern of gaping fissures more intricate than a spider's web.

Knights, guards, casters—everyone except Fluder in the sky was swallowed up by the earth.

The dark elf, casually standing there, must have skillfully kept her allies out of the area of effect. When she pulled the staff out of the ground, the fissures sealed up just as suddenly as they had opened. In fact, they closed up so quickly that the spiderweb shape appeared again as ridges of dirt.

None of the knights who had been gathered in the courtyard were anywhere to be found. Everything was over all too quickly.

"Okay, then! We killed them all. Next, we'll kill everyone in the castle... Er, wait, we don't know which one is

the emperor, so I guess we won't do that! But if he doesn't come out soon, we'll destroy the city! Emperor, please hurry up and get out here!"

"Y-your Imperial Majesty," a retainer asked, pale faced and shuddering. "…Do you think by coming on a dragon they mean to say we 'stepped on the dragon's tail'?"

Jircniv willed himself to stop trembling. It wouldn't do for the emperor, the only absolute being, the man who held all power in his hand, to show fear in front of his retainers. "Ainz Ooal Gown… Who is he? No…this isn't the time." He shouted out the window, "I am the emperor, Jircniv Rune Farlord El Nix! I want to talk! Messengers, would you mind coming over here?" He faced his retainers. "Prepare our warmest welcome! On the double!"

He turned from his retainers as they practically fell over one another rushing out of the room, back to the dark elves, who were watching him. "…I underestimated him. If these are his subordinates… Maybe he's too much for me to handle…? But I can't back down now. If you want to negotiate…then our next battle will be fought with words, Ainz Ooal Gown! I'll thwart whatever it is you're planning!"

Epilogue

EPILOGUE

“Here are the hundred gold trade coins as promised and the bond.”

Upon looking at the contents of the leather pouch and nodding in satisfaction, Arché’s father signed the parchment offered to him with zero hesitation. Then he stamped it with the family crest. His practiced motions were evidence that he had performed similar transactions many times.

“Is that all right?”

The man looked at the parchment and nodded. If Hekkeran and Imina had been there, they would have scowled. He was the one who had come to the inn where Foresight was staying.

After looking it over a few times, he was satisfied there were no errors, and once the ink had dried, he rolled it up and tossed it into a tube for safekeeping.

“Yes, everything’s in order.” The man gestured at the leather pouch in front of Arché’s father and asked, “You don’t want to check it?”

“It’s no trouble if it’s a gold off.”

“If you say so.” The man answered the generous reply with a nod.

He had made sure the amount was correct, of course. Still, it was pretty bad for a family in these circumstances to not bother about a gold piece. Well, they were probably doomed by simple

virtue of having such an irresponsible person heading their household.

The man didn't have a problem as long as he was a good customer.

"I trust we can agree to the same interest and payment period terms as always?"

The master of the house replied with a benevolent—as expected—nod. He seemed to have no inkling that he was in the inferior position in this relationship.

The man nodded in acknowledgment.

"…By the way, is your daughter well?"

"Hmm?"

The man remembered there were three of them and added, "Miss Arché."

"Ahh, Arché. She's out on a job."

"…I see."

And while your daughter is out working, what are you doing?! he thought but skillfully concealed the contempt deep in his eyes.

He began to pity the girl for having a father like this.

He wasn't heartless.

But the most important thing was that they pay him back with interest. And that they borrow from him again and again. He wasn't keen on sticking his nose into other people's domestic affairs.

“Yes, it’s a bit impertinent of her to go off earning money, but what can you do?”

The man frowned slightly at the father’s grumble. If something happened, it would be a problem if it affected repayment. And he was making quite a lot on this household in interest. If possible, he wanted to keep this relationship going for a long time. For that reason, he poked his nose somewhere he normally wouldn’t.

“Did something happen?”

“No, nothing serious. She’s just a foolish girl who’s forgotten how much she owes her parents, trying to defy us all the time.”

“Well, if that’s all…”

“I really need to give her a good talking-to—about what it means to be a noble.”

The man didn’t say what he was thinking. But he did want to say one thing: “Must be tough.”

“It truly is. That silly girl…” The man hadn’t specified for whom, so Arché’s father grumbled, assuming it referred to his own suffering.

A hundred gold trade coins was a lot of money. And if things followed the usual pattern, he would spend it all almost immediately. The man figured he would probably be summoned again in that event, but he concluded it would be better to not lend any more until the current balance was repaid.

At that point, he looked around the room.

Even to his eyes, the numerous furnishings filling the place were splendid. They would be enough to get back at least what he was owed. And even if he couldn’t make it back with the furniture and whatnot…

He lowered his eyes to conceal the emotion that came into them.

"I think it's strange a daughter of the Furt family should have to do such dirty work. Her friends seem like commoners, surely the despicable type."

"I wonder…," the man said thoughtfully, recalling the pair of them he had met at the pub.

Arché's father must have read something in the tone of his voice, because he hurriedly added an excuse. "I don't mean anything about commoners in general. Just her friends are the adventuring type."

"Could be."

"Right? Maybe it was their influence that caused her to start rebelling. I really need to give her a talking-to. A girl should listen to her father; that's only reasonable. She's got a lot of living to do before she can talk back to me."

With a glance at the offended father, the man stood up. "Well, I have other clients to see, so I must be going now. I'll be expecting the repayment."

"When is Arché getting back again?"

"Pretty soon!"

There were two little girls in the room. They looked just like two peas in a pod and were sitting side by side using the bed as a chair.

The blush of pink in their white cheeks was angelic. Their features, which resembled their sister's, hinted at how beautiful they would be when they grew up.

They wore matching, spotless white dresses with an abun-

dance of frills. The white legs stretching out from beneath them dangled over the side of the bed.

“Really?”

“Really!”

“Are you sure?”

“Yup!”

“We’re moving when she gets back, right?”

“Yup!”

They giggled. They hadn’t given much thought to what “moving” actually meant, but they knew one thing—that when it happened, their big sister, whom they loved so much, would never go away somewhere ever again. That made them happy.

Arché was away a lot. They didn’t know what she did while she was gone, but they knew it was very important in some way, so they made a point of not complaining. Still, they wished they could play with her.

Yes, they loved Arché, their warm, kind big sister, who knew so many things.

“She’s not back yet, huh?”

“Not yet.”

“It’ll be great, won’t it, Koudélika?”

“Sure will, Urélika.”

“I’ll have her read to me!”

“I’ll have her sleep with me!”

“No fair, Koudélika!”

“You’re not fair, either, Urélika!”

They looked at each other with the same giddy smile. Then they laughed, their giggles sounding like jingling bells.

“Well, then you can read with us, Koudélika, with me and Arché.”

“Okay, then you can sleep with us, Urélika, with me and Arché.”

They smiled, dreaming of the wonderful time just ahead…

OVERLORD
Character Profiles



Character 29



Neuronist Painkill

Grotesque

The Five Worst: The one with the most evil job

Position — Officer of Intelligence Gathering, the Great Tomb of Nazarick (aka the Officer of Torture)

Residence — The room Pain Is Not to Tell in the Ice Prison on the fifth level

Alignment — Evil (Karma Points: -425)

Race Levels — Brain Eater 7lv

Class Levels — Bishop 3lv

Doctor 10lv

God Hand 3lv

[Race levels] + [Class levels] — 23 levels

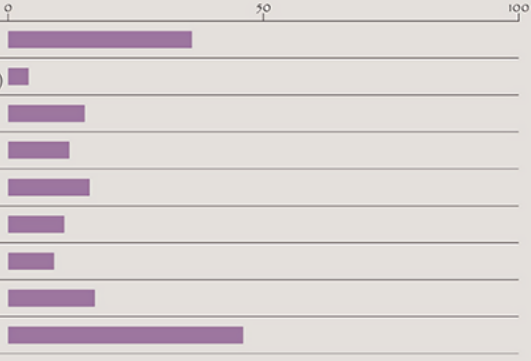
● Race levels ● Class levels

7 acquired total — 16 acquired total

status

Status

Comparative ratio on a scale of 100



Character 30

The Prince of Fear

Grotesque

The Five Worst: The one with the most evil base (residence)



Position — Domain guardian on the second level in the Great Tomb of Nazarick

Residence — Black Capsule on the second level

Alignment — Neutral (Karma Points: -10)

Race Levels — Insect Druid — 10 lv

Etc.

Class Levels — High Druid — 5 lv

Summoner — 3 lv

Bug Tamer — 2 lv

Minimum (Paid) — 3 lv

Etc.

[Race levels] + [Class levels] — 30 levels

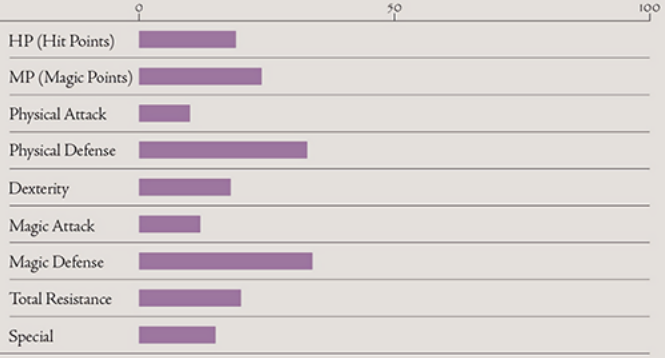
Race levels — Class levels

12 acquired total — 18 acquired total

status

Status

Comparative ratio on a scale of 100



Character 31



Hekkeran Termite

Humanoid

Pillar of the team

Position — Leader of Foresight

Residence — The Singing Apple

Class Levels — Fighter ——— ? lv
Fencer ——— ? lv
Sword Dancer ——— ? lv

Birthday — 3 Early Wind Moon

Hobby — Counting his savings

personal character

A dual blade–wielding fencer who honed the speed and number of his strikes into a weapon. The fourth son of a merchant, he originally aimed to be an adventurer, but perhaps because he liked money so much, he somehow ended up as a worker. Once he decided something wasn't dangerous, he would act without thinking on it too much—a tendency for which Imina often scolded him. Still, he was an outstanding leader, and the way he conducted himself meant the team had very few enemies.

Arché Eeb Rile Furt

Humanoid

A little sister–type despite being a beloved elder sister



Position — Member of Foresight

Residence — The Singing Apple (in spirit)

Class Levels — Wizard ——— ? lv
Academic Wizard ——— ? lv
High Wizard ——— ? lv

Birthday — 26 Mid-Wind Moon

Hobby — Reading (various things)

personal character

A wizard, the type of arcane caster who learns magic as an academic discipline. When her house was ruined, she abandoned all her dreams and became a worker. The other members of the team treated her like their cute little sister, and she felt like they were her elder siblings. People who knew her thought she had brilliant aptitude, but actually she was just an early bloomer and had already nearly reached the limits of her potential.



Imina

Humanoid

An agile archer

Position —— Member of Foresight

Residence —— The Singing Apple

Class Levels —— Ranger —— ? lv
Thief —— ? lv
Bushwalker —— ? lv
Etc.

Birthday —— 29 Early Fire Moon

Hobby —— (Doing nothing and) spacing out

{ personal character }

A half elf with an elven father and a human mother. Her father is still alive and well. She was born with a talent that made it easier for her to float and harder for her to drown (not that it would prevent her from drowning entirely), but she hated swimming because she was once attacked by a monster in a marsh and had a rough time.

Roberdyck Goltron

Humanoid

A priest and truly good person



Position — Member of Foresight

Residence — The Singing Apple

Class Levels — Cleric — ? lv
High Cleric — ? lv
Templar — ? lv

Birthday — 13 Mid-Water Moon

Hobby — DIY projects

personal character

Was an elite priest originally but grew frustrated by the various restrictions that kept him from saving people, so he became a worker. He was a good person who gave a portion of his earnings to homes for orphaned children and often did jobs in the place of other priests who felt the same way as him. Though he didn't attract attention to himself, he was praised and respected by many.

AFTERWORD

It's been seven months since Volume 6 went on sale. Long time no see—it's Maruyama.

This book is being published at the end of August, so it's still hot out, huh? I have the feeling that when I was a kid the heat was mostly over by September, but it's not like that anymore. I feel like it stays hot till about the middle of September these days. Anyhow, those are just my impressions from my childhood, so maybe nothing has changed at all.

Since I wear more of the clothing known as fat than most other people, I really loathe summer. That's because even though I'm usually in a fairly air-conditioned room due to my computer giving off heat, I sweat a ton during the commute to and from work. My cologne probably washes away in the sweat, so it's really just the worst.

That's the kind of hot day it must be. Those of you who saw the obi wrap at the store must have nearly emitted a strange little scream, like, *Whah!* Maybe you thought it was a hallucination brought on by the heat.

But it's true!

I nearly shouted, *Seriously?!* when I heard, too, but it's really happening. We're making an *Overlord* anime!

I'm going to do my best to make sure we deliver something good, so thanks for your support.

Now, I'll endure the cramps in my stomach to give some

thank-yous.

To so-bin for working so hard with me on the most unbelievable illustrations ever to grace a light novel's pages: They are true masterpieces. I'm deeply grateful, and I'm sure the readers are, too! Let's go out to eat again sometime! Thank you, designers at Code Design for the cool design as usual. Proofreader Osako, thank you for all your corrections.

To F——ta, who gives me the stern warning to not go halfway and who proposed an illustration of the Prince of Fear with zero hesitation: I'd like you to not kill yourself and put in moderate efforts on a reasonable workload.

Also, to everyone involved with the creation of *Overlord*, thank you! And Honey, thanks again for all sorts of things.

Finally, I thank everyone who bought the book!

KUGANE MARUYAMA

August 2014



Afterword by so-bin

WHILE THE WORKERS WERE ALL BEING TORTURED,
I WAS ALSO BEING TORTURED BY MARUYAMA (WITH WORK REQUESTS)
AND CRYING BLOOD.

そうびん

AFTER AINZ SAVED THE VILLAGE OF CARNE... ENRI AND NFIREA'S

BUDDING ROMANCE

CAN BE SEEN, AND THE GOBLINS ARE AROUND, TOO. PLUS, THE DAILY LIFE OF NAZARICK'S GUARDIANS IS REVEALED. THE AUTHOR'S FERVENT WISH TO DO A COMPLETELY ORIGINAL STORY IS REALIZED IN A

DOUBLEHEADER

VOLUME. YOU MIGHT LEARN SOMETHING YOU'VE BEEN WANTING TO KNOW IN VOLUME



Volume Eight

OVERLORD

Volume 8: The Two Leaders

Kugane Maruyama | Illustration by so-bin

Coming soon from YEN ON!